

7

MIST

ASATO ASATO

ILLUSTRATION:
Shirabii

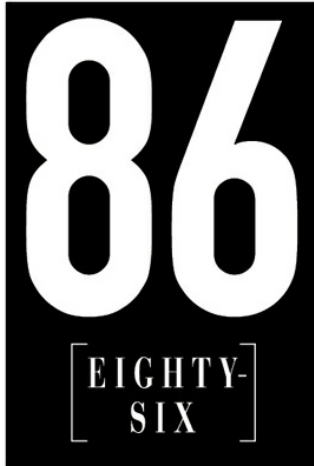
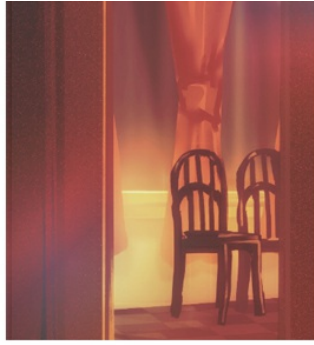
MECHANICAL DESIGN:
I-IV

86

[EIGHTY-
SIX]

VISIT...

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7

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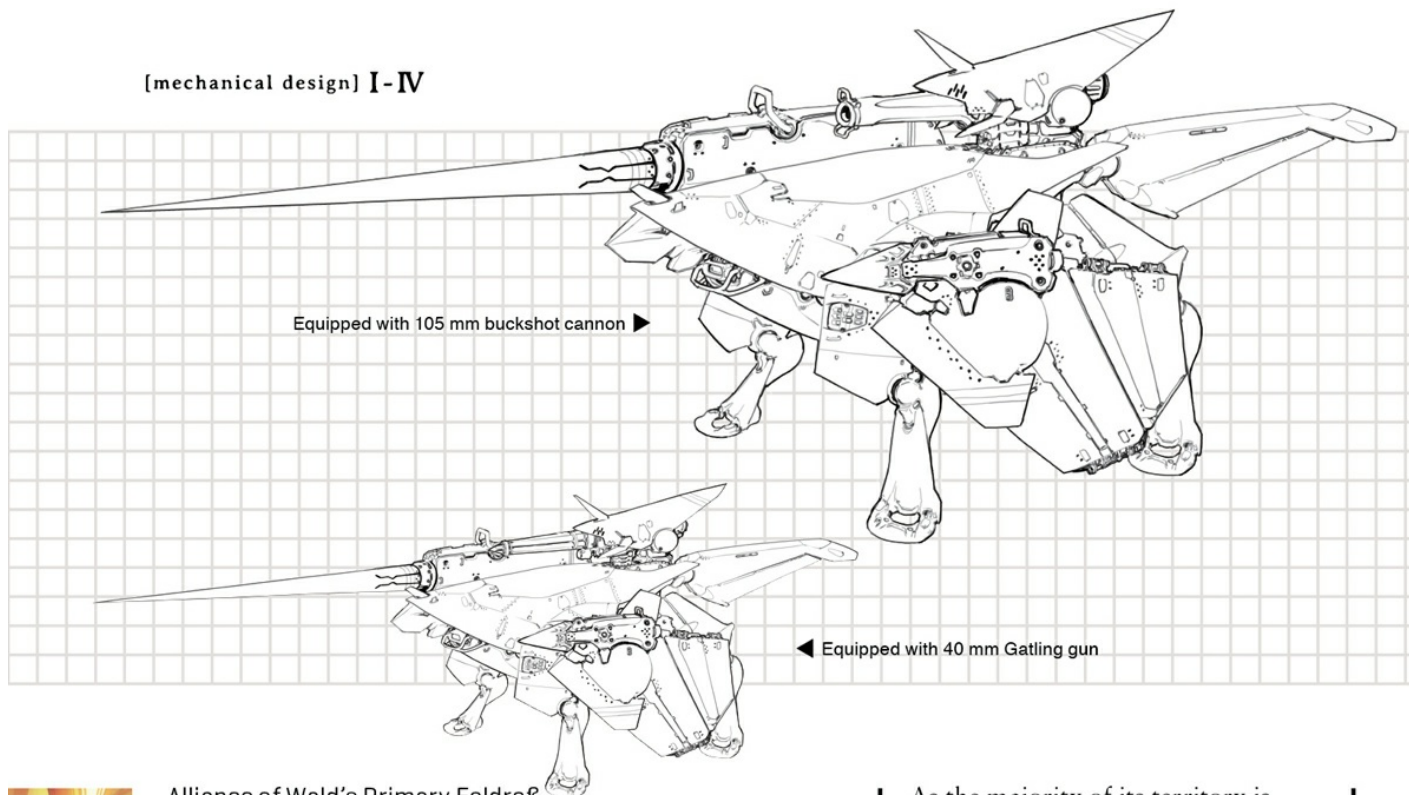
I-IV



NEW YORK



[mechanical design] I-IV



Alliance of Wald's Primary Feldreß

Stollenwurm

[S P E C S]

Manufacturer: Third Yasen Arsenal

Total Length: 4.5 m / Height: 3.5 m

(not including auxiliary armaments)

[F I X E D A R M A M E N T S]

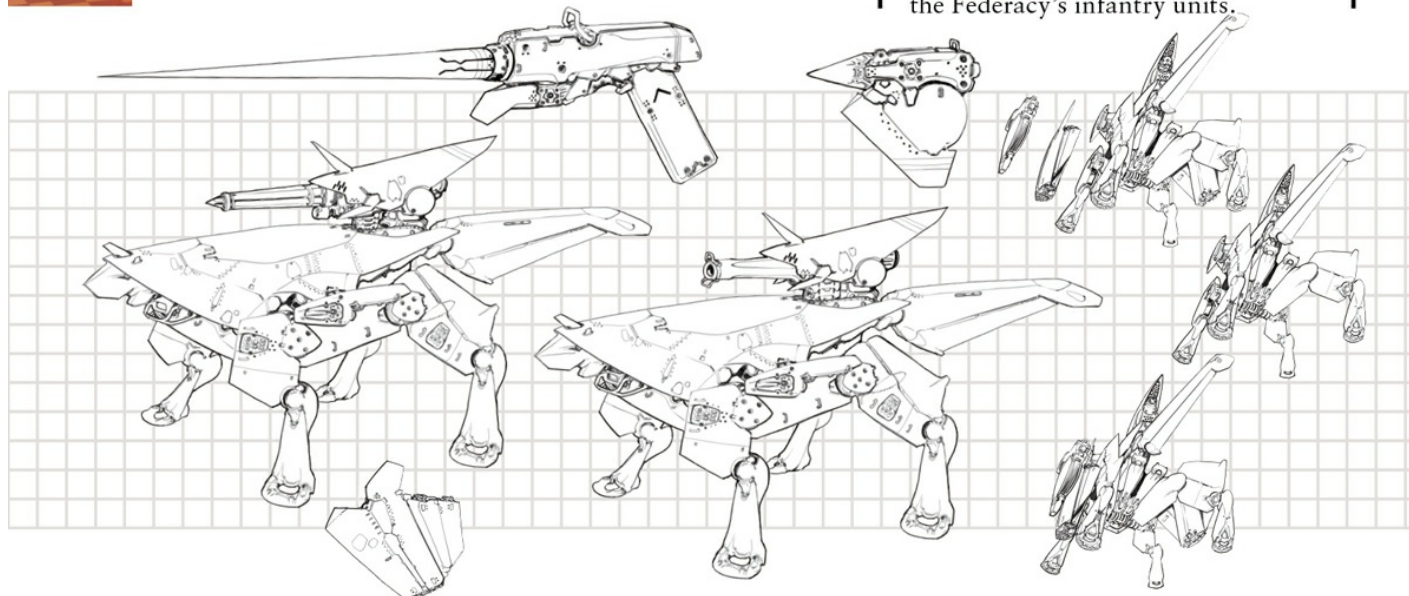
Rear turret: a choice between a 105 mm buckshot cannon
or a 40 mm Gatling gun

Shoulder pylons: High-Frequency Lance×1 & Wire Anchor×1
or Wire Anchor×2

Special equipment: Torso pylons—One pair of gliding wings

As the majority of its territory is mountainous terrain, the Alliance of Wald developed this unit's highly optimized, radical design for defense. Due to its utilization of gliding wings, it is designed for high-mobility combat while making use of the terrain to gain the advantage.

Because of the design, it is constructed to be as mobile as possible and equipped with light weapons, but only a small percentage of operators can survive piloting it. As such, this unit is designed around its operators boarding it while being equipped with the same armored skeletons as the Federacy's infantry units.







DESCRIPTIONS OF INVOLVED COUNTRIES



THE REPUBLIC OF SAN MAGNOLIA

(Stage of Volumes 1 and 4)

Designated all people who are not of Alba descent as Eighty-Six and forced them to fight in so-called drones. Eventually, the Republic's defensive lines crumbled during the Legion's large-scale offensive, and it just barely survived thanks to aid from the Federal Republic of Gladi. It has retained its autonomy, however, and there still seem to be disconcerting movements within the regime.

Its national flag and emblem are arranged in five colors that stand for the ideas of freedom, equality, brotherhood, justice, and nobility.



THE UNITED KINGDOM OF ROA GRACIA

(Stage of Volumes 5 and 6)

A nation north of Gladi, it requested the aid of the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package, which Shin and Lena belong to. The country possesses advanced AI technology and created the Mariana Model, which serves as the basis for the Legion's control AI. Using this technology, they make use of the neural networks of deceased soldiers to develop the artificial soldiers called Sirins.

Its national flag and emblem are fashioned with the motif of the unicorn.



THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GLADI

(Stage of Volumes 2 and 3)

A democratic nation born from the ashes of the Gladian Empire, the developers of the Legion. It sheltered Shin and his fellow Eighty-Six following their escape from the Republic. Its temporary leader is Ernst Zimmerman. Despite many sacrifices, it continues to bravely oppose the Legion's rampage.

Its national flag and emblem are fashioned in the image of the two-headed eagle.



THE ALLIANCE OF WALD

(Stage of Volume 7)

A mountainous country located to the south of the Federal Republic of Gladi. It cooperated with the United Kingdom of Roa Gracia and the Federacy in the Morpheo's subjugation operation during the events of Volumes 2 and 3. It is a technological giant that developed and first made use of the polydramal armored weapon—Feldre6—which served as the basis for the Federacy's Reginleif and other armored weapons.

Its national flag and emblem are designed with the image of a powerful mountain goat.

Rest well. Prepare for the next war.

Life, land, and legacy.
All reduced to a number.

7
MIST

ASATO ASATO

ILLUSTRATION: Shirabii
MECHANICAL DESIGN: I-IV

86

[EIGHTY-
SIX]

Rest Well. Prepare for the Next Battle.

At this point, they can only be considered heroes.

—FREDERICA ROSENFORT,
RECOLLECTIONS OF THE BATTLEFIELD

86—EIGHTY-SIX

Vol. 7

ASATO ASATO

Translation by Roman Lempert

Cover art by Shirabii

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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PROLOGUE

MIST OF THE BATTLEFIELD

The people called it the wurm's roost.

The sacred peak, Mount Wyrmnest, stood at the lofty center of its mountain range. This crag's precipitous cliffs were terrifyingly steep, challenging the heavens with their jagged peaks. It divided the continent into north and south, making it a strategic point in terms of trade routes.

The mountaintops, with their jointed-pillar shapes and snowy crowns, seemed to pierce the sky. Aside from the people who lived in this harsh terrain, ibex, eagles, and lynx also made their homes in these mountains.

Those perilous cliffs were the essence of the country. An impregnable, transcendent, natural fortress.

"Hawkeye Seven to all pillboxes. Second wave approaching."

Scouting intel from the lookout bases located along the mountain range was transmitted electronically to the defensive formation.

"Enemy composition confirmed. Those hunks of scrap metal never learn. More Grauwolf. Lure them into the trap and crush them from the flank."

"Roger that."

A steel-gray countercurrent avalanched toward them. The Legion advanced from the foot of the mountain, which was firmly under their control, to the peaks, which they had been denied access to. A large force of Grauwolf members scrambled up the cliffs, the sharp tips of their legs stabbing into the rock, using any and every foothold they could manage.

The Tank types, Löwe, had no hope of traversing such steep terrain, to say nothing of the Heavy Tank type, Dinosauria. Löwe were made for fighting on level terrain and were greatly limited when it came to firing at vertical angles.

It's for this reason that the armor at the top of their turrets was thinner. As a rule of thumb, armored weapons generally had a hard time traversing high altitudes.

So the battlefield was dominated by the lightweight, high-mobility Dragoon-type Legion units—the Grauwolf.

The first obstacle they had to brave was the steepness of the slopes themselves, also dotted with dragon's teeth. After having the speed they usually prided themselves on impeded by the difficult climb and iron fences, they were met with minefields—which were meticulously reset by combat engineers after each battle. These explosives scattered lethal rounds of buckshot at all who were unfortunate enough to trigger them.

And the moment the Grauwolf were forced to halt their advance, they were mowed down by relentless machine-gun and autocannon fire from the pillboxes stationed around the area. The shots tore through their light armor and into their internal mechanisms, creating induced explosions in the rocket launchers they carried on their backs.

But these autonomous weapons knew no fear and advanced in spite of the difficult road ahead. They continue their climb, paying no heed to the rain of fire and steel pelting them from above. They stepped over the remains of their allies, sometimes even crushing them underfoot as they charged their enemy.

True to the cold efficiency that the Legion had overwhelmed humankind with to date, the Grauwolf were a menace. To complement an agility and mobility that exceeded that of any human, or any Feldreiß on the side of humankind, they were armed with high-frequency blades capable of tearing through a tank's frontal armor and a six-tube anti-tank multiple missile launcher on their backs.

But to the Legion, the Grauwolf were no different from the Scout-type Ameise or the self-propelled mines. They were essentially foot soldiers—rank-and-file units that were perfectly replaceable. In other words, no matter how many of them were destroyed, it was by no means a blow to the Legion.

“Dammit...”

The pillboxes in the front row had finally taken a hit. The surviving

mechanized infantry escaped the Grauwolf's clutches, carrying their autocannons and heavy machine guns in hand. The term *mechanized infantry* once referred to soldiers driving in motor vehicles, but in this land, they were quite literally mechanized soldiers.

In order to increase maneuverability, they wore fortified exoskeletons that were linked directly to their nervous systems. This mountainous country's population was small, and being a soldier was considered the most important profession. As such, all soldiers were equipped with this special armor.

The Alliance of Wald, a militaristic country located along the peaks of the southern region of the continent. They upheld individual independence as their national policy and saw their citizens as the sword that defended the nation. Where the very peaks that made up its territory also served as its fortress.

"Third battalion to Hawkeye Seven! Temporarily abandoning third position and falling back!"

"Roger that, third battalion. You can leave the rest—"

"—to us."

A shadow descended over the battlefield. It crossed the southern areas of Mount Wyrmnest, soaring above the mechanized infantry and protecting them as it went. Feldreß emblazoned with the Alliance's GOAT CREST L landed one after another. They had four bestial legs and stabilizers resembling long tails.

The part that resembled an animal's back carried this unit's main armament, and from the tip of its shoulders extended fanglike wire anchors. They were as wolves blending into the forest's cover. Their armor was painted in a brown camouflage pattern, and they had a pair of optical sensors that shone yellow like the eyes of a beast.

But the units' most prominent features were the metallic skeletal appendages that extended from sides of their large cockpit blocks, reminiscent of a griffin's wings.

"The Mk. 6 Stollenwurm, I see. You made it, armored unit."

"Of course, comrade. Rally your forces... We're going to turn this around."

The next moment, the Stollenwurm rammed the advancing wave of Grauwolf members. Moving in a nearly perfect vertical angle—in what was effectively a free fall—they descended on the Legion. Using any foothold they could, they leaped down like mountain lions. If their four legs weren't enough, they would fold their bodies and use their auxiliary legs to grab onto the cliff face, and before long, they intersected with the enemy.

Cannons roared. Any Grauwolf caught in point-blank autocannon fire or buckshots dispersed. Stollenwurm were optimized for melee combat—which was the norm in this mountainous terrain—and were armed with adaptable, swiftly rotating short-barrel turrets.

Even the agile Grauwolf were at the mercy of gravity and couldn't maintain the lethal speed they usually possessed during a climb. They were also a lightly armored unit to begin with. And so they were blown away, internal mechanisms and all, by the Stollenwurm, like pieces of silk slashed by a sharp blade.

One Stollenwurm with the Personal Mark of a musket rifle stood head and shoulders above the rest. Much like their infantry, the Alliance cherished its limited number of Feldreiß Operators, and so they equipped them with sufficient armor. And in order to increase the unit's mobility, the Stollenwurm was furnished with gliding wings. The units would soar by riding the winds blowing through the bases located near the mountain peaks. This unique tactic allowed them to reach the surface and the front lines of battle faster than would have ever been possible on foot.

All they did was glide, and the wings themselves had no means of propulsion. Because they were only meant for rapid descent, they were useless in combat. As such, the wings would be spread out and deployed when necessary and folded up otherwise.

Typically, they would catch a gust of wind that would curb their fall and then change course, moving with the wind and reflecting the grace and freedom of a swooping eagle. But this unit was different. The moment the wind blew, it would move with startling accuracy, as if it could see the air currents.

A transmission came in from a pillbox far above them. It had been recovered from the enemy. HQ promptly ordered a retreat. The Alliance couldn't allow

itself to chase its enemies too far and lose precious Feldreß and operatives in the process.

“Anna Maria, acknowledged. All units, cease hostilities and return to base.”

Replying to both transmissions, the Operator of the Stollenwurm with the musket rifle mark let out a small sigh. As always, operations were half-baked, anticlimactic, and left much to be desired. Feldreß cockpits were typically cramped no matter the country or model, but the Stollenwurm’s was exceptionally tight. It had no optical screens, instead transmitting information directly into the Operator’s corneas through the head-mounted display installed over the fortified exoskeleton.

Most of the cockpit was taken up by the armored skeleton and the fixed parts that doubled as dampeners. In order to ease the burden on the Operator and ensure their safety because of the extreme acceleration of the free fall and the impact of the landing, all Alliance Operators were equipped with armored fortified exoskeletons when operating Feldreß.

One of the Operator’s consort units caught up to the unit with the Personal Mark and sent them a transmission.

“As impressive as ever, Captain.”

“Anyone can pull this off with enough experience, Master Sergeant.”

“This heroic princess of ours says some pretty tough things, eh?” Another subordinate cut into their exchange, and voices of laughter filled the transmission.

“So we’ll be transferred after this operation, right...? And our next destination is in the Federacy. With those...”

“Yeah.”

They were the ones cast aside by their homeland and denied their names and human rights. But even still, they fought through a battlefield of certain death. They had then proceeded to encroach upon the Legion’s territories and destroy their trump card, the Morpho. After that, they annihilated two Legion production bases located in the Republic’s north and in the depths of the United Kingdom’s Dragon Fang Mountain.

Lastly, they captured the queen. They were a group of true elites. The Federacy's mightiest blades—combat-crazed berserkers who were given shelter for the time being. They were raised on the battlefield, tempered by the fires of conflict and whetted by the ravages of war. They were monsters for whom death was a way of life.

...Just like me.

“The Eighty-Sixth Strike Package. A unit made of the fearsome Eighty-Six.”

Federal Republic of Giad Military
Eighty-Sixth Strike Package



Shin

A young man marked by the Republic of San Magnolia with the stigma of being a subhuman Eighty-Six. He possesses the ability to hear the "voices" of the Legion and is a pilot of remarkable skill who has survived countless battles. He is currently the operations commander for the newly formed Eighty-Sixth Strike Package.



Lena

A Handler who once fought alongside Shin and the Eighty-Six. She has been reunited with them following their death march into Legion territory cruelly disguised as a Special Reconnaissance mission and now serves as tactical commander for the Federacy, once again fighting side by side with them.



Frederica

An orphaned daughter of the old Empire of Giad, where the Legion were developed. She cooperates with Shin and the Eighty-Six for the sake of defeating Kiriya, her former knight and brotherly guardian, who was assimilated by the Legion. She currently serves as an assistant control aide for Lena in the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package.



Raiden

A young man of the Eighty-Six who found shelter in the Federacy along with Shin. An inseparable friend to Shin, Raiden saves him from isolation when the haunting voices of the Legion weigh upon him.



Theo

A young man of the Eighty-Six. A coolheaded cynic with a sharp tongue. He excels in high-mobility combat by moving about freely with the help of his wires.



Kurena

A young woman of the Eighty-Six and an exceptionally skilled sniper. She harbors feelings for Shin, but will they ever be reciprocated...?



Anju

A young woman of the Eighty-Six. She appears graceful but shows a much more ruthless side during battle. She specializes in suppressing fire through the use of missiles.



Grethe

Ranked colonel. She is the commanding officer for Shin and his group, and the unit commander for the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package. She developed the new type of Feldreß, the Regineif.



Annette

A friend of Lena's and head of research and development for the Para-RAID system. She was childhood friends with Shin back when they both lived in the Republic's First Sector. She was dispatched with Lena to the Federacy and was able to finally reunite with Shin.



Shiden

One of the Eighty-Six, and a subordinate of Lena's following the departure of Shin and his group. She is a valiant warrior who protected Lena and survived on the Republic's battlefield until the very end. She has since joined the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package, where she heads Lena's personal guard.



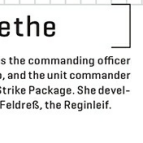
Vika

The fifth prince of the United Kingdom of Roa Gracia. He is the Amethystus of the current generation—a unique Esper with superhuman intelligence. These Espers are direct products of the Roa Gracia royal bloodline. He developed the human-shaped, semiautonomous control units—the Sirins—and supports the United Kingdom's primary war front.



Lerche

The first of the Sirins. She possesses the neural network of Vika's deceased childhood friend. Her speech patterns are often peculiar.



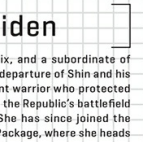
Bernholdt

One of Shin's subordinates in the Federacy military and a veteran sergeant. Looks up to Shin as his commander despite being the older of the two and was appointed captain of one of the newly formed Strike Package's squadrons. He supports Shin in battle.



Marcel

A Federacy soldier. He was originally a Feldreß Operator, but in a past battle, he suffered a debilitating injury, which left him unable to pilot a Feldreß. He has since transferred to the role of support personnel in Lena's command car.



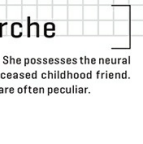
Dustin

A student who gave a speech condemning the treatment of the Eighty-Six prior to the Republic's fall. He volunteered to join the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package after Republic citizens were liberated. He is a member of Anju's unit.



Rito

A young man of the Eighty-Six who survived the Republic's fall and joined the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package. He was once a member of a squadron Shin belonged to. He has less combat experience than many other members of the Strike Package.



Willem

Chief of staff for the Federal Republic of Giad's western front military. He's a foul-mouthed realist, but he also cares for the Eighty-Six in his own way. He seems to have history with Grethe.

CHAPTER 1

HAZE BLUE

Every light in the room was off. Tendrils of white cigarette smoke danced through the air.

“...Regarding our pending issue.”

Sunlight filtered in through the window. Outside, all was bathed in the blinding-white glow of midday summer. The Federal Republic of Giad’s summers were not as brief as in the United Kingdom, due to being a good distance away from the frozen north. Theirs was a summer where flowers bloomed with all their might, as if trying to celebrate their short lives for as long as possible.

There were vibrant petals as far as the eye could see—in the streets, in the fields, and even on the western front, all flaunting their vitality. The lush green of the vegetation had deepened in hue so much that it almost seemed black. Growing ever defiantly, it stretched toward the azure sky, which boasted a clarity unique to the summer months.

The dark silhouettes sitting in the dim room oddly contrasted the brilliant scenery outside. One man—a one-eyed officer wearing a black eyepatch—broke the silence. His steel-gray uniform’s left breast was adorned by a ribbon bar. He had the pitch-black hair and eye color characteristic of one of the old Empire’s pureblood races: an Onyx.

He was the commander of the western front’s 177th Armored Division, Major General Richard Altner.

Another officer, also a major general, with one artificial leg and the air force’s insignia still appended to his uniform, responded to Richard’s words while blowing out a puff of white smoke. He flicked his thick fingers, dropping the ash into a gorgeous silver tray sitting on the polished, amber-colored wooden

mosaic table.

“The Eighty-Sixth Strike Package’s 1st Armored Division... The detachment led by the Bloodstained Queen and the Headless Reaper.”

“They’ve accumulated a bit too much experience. Or perhaps I should say they’ve seen too many things they should not have seen,” Major General Altner said grimly, to which the other silhouettes in the room nodded.

Badges identifying high-ranking officials of the Giad military glittered from all their lapels. They were the generals in charge of the western front. These officers continued their confidential meeting, as if trying to hide from the summer sun.

“We must come up with a countermeasure at once.”

“Thankfully, the Legion offensive seems to be quieting down for the moment. Apparently, they’re reorganizing their forces. If we’re going to do this, now would be the time.”

“Even those murder machines can’t stay composed after losing two production bases and having one of their commander units seized.”

“Which is convenient for us. It gives us ample time to enact our countermeasure.”

The Eighty-Sixth Strike Package. A raiding force built around the Eighty-Six. Their activities greatly exceeded expectations. In the three months since the unit’s birth, they brought down two Legion bases. They exposed the existence of the Sheepdogs and the Phönix and both discovered the reality of the theorized Zentaur units and managed to subjugate several of them.

They had recorded video data and brought back sample parts of the Weisel and Admiral units in the Dragon Fang Mountain base. And in that same operation, they saved the United Kingdom from crisis and even captured a Legion commander unit.

They racked up achievements that were unrivaled not just in the entire western front but also by any other unit among their allies, the United Kingdom and the Alliance.

“The Merciless Queen,” one of the silhouettes spat out bitterly. “The commander unit speculated to harbor the consciousness of Zelene Birkenbaum... I hear the one who made its capture possible was that Reaper, as well. This is all quite *troublesome*.”

“Heroes have no place in this world, after all.”

“Soldiers are to be seen as replaceable parts. Victory in battle must not rest on the shoulders of a single hero.”

“...Don’t worry.”

The one silhouette who had kept silent so far, the chief of staff for the western front, Commodore Willem Ehrenfried, parted his lips.

“I’ve already put something in motion. I believe you will receive the report soon enough.”

Major General Altner scoffed.

“You work quickly as usual, Willem. Your reputation as Ehrenfried’s murderous blade is well earned.”

The chief of staff, Willem, regarded him with a sardonic smile. He gave off the atmosphere of a cold, well-whetted military saber.

“You exaggerate, Major General. This is just paperwork. All I did was sign a few pesky documents and place them in the settlement box.”

He gave an exaggerated shrug. In one hand, he held a cigarette, and in the other, he held materials regarding the aforementioned countermeasure. Deciding he no longer needed the document, his aide, who had been standing by during the exchange, stepped forward, accepted the proffered document, and returned to his spot near the wall.

Willem’s aide came from a long line of servants who had attended his family for generations. He would always hide in the shadows until he was needed, appear at his master’s side a moment before he was called, and return to his place in the shadows as he did what needed to be done. Such diligence was the product of his upbringing.

This aide, who was still fairly young, returned to his spot without another

word. His flawless performance was met with no praise from either the chief of staff or the other officers present. Before the Federacy's founding, they were all high-ranking nobles in the Empire and were used to seeing aides and servants as those who remained out of sight.

The aides themselves did not require any recognition, either, with the exception of the words their masters gave them at the end of each workday. They were shadows, not meant to be acknowledged. If anyone was to offer them words of praise, it would simply show they were being too conspicuous and thus failed in their duties.

And so the officers immediately forgot the aide's existence and continued their conversation as if they had never been interrupted. The aide didn't show any sign of displeasure at that fact. He stood as expressionless as a doll for the duration of his duty, breathing as quietly as he could.

His black eyes turned a fleeting glance at the "document" the chief of staff had just handed him, however. In the ten years the Legion War had raged on, there was no need for the Federacy to update it, and so its cover was quite old and weathered.

It was a document that seemed to be the worst possible match for this extravagant—yet slightly gloomy—room in the western front's HQ, full of smoke and stern Federacy officers. Even in his hands, it seemed to stand out with its gaudy cover with frivolously colored text.

ALLIANCE OF WALD

TOUR GUIDEBOOK

Looking down at it, the aide thought:

So in other words... Those children had seen a warehouse full of skeletal corpses in the Republic operation... They had to climb up a cliff along a road formed from their allies' remains. These poor child soldiers have been faced with one gruesome sight after another, and so the adults have sought to ease their troubled minds by sending them on vacation...

Why must the chief of staff and the other officers spend their cigarette break pretending to be a bunch of evil masterminds plotting something terrible...?

Such was the aide's exasperated, silent soliloquy.



"I...can..."

As they ran forward with young and shapely limbs, their bare feet slapped against the marble floor. The light reflected off the slightly tanned yet pale skin unique to girls of their age.

"...flyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!"

Raising her voice in a spirited cheer—a far cry from her usual demeanor—Kurena plunged into the pool. A warm spray flew up in her wake. It was hard to see the green stone bottom of the pool through the steamy water, but it was deep enough for one to dive without issue.

Kurena submerged herself until only the very top of her head was above the water. Then she bobbed her face up past the surface before spreading out her limbs and enjoying a leisurely float.

"Wheeew... It's so waaarm..."

Frederica, who happened to be in Kurena's splash zone and had failed to avoid the water in time, adorably furrowed her brows.

"Kurena! Where are your manners?! You're an adult, are you not?!"

"But it's my first time being in a bath this big..."

Yes, they were in a bath. But the word *bath* could not accurately reflect the sheer scale of the luxurious complex. It had been built long ago, as part of an emperor's villa, and the domed structure was easily large enough to fit an entire sports track. The floor was covered in ancient, well-polished marble. Building blocks made from various types of stone were meticulously placed together, creating a multicolored geometric pattern on the floor.

The bath itself was dug out in a rectangular shape and could have easily been used as a competitive swimming pool. Its surface was carved from a massive marble monolith, and to everyone's surprise, there weren't any seams at the bottom of the bath, meaning it had been created from a single slab of marble. The answer to how many human hands and horses were required to carry such

a gigantic slab up a steep mountain in the ancient times would remain a mystery.

Standing in the middle of the bath, as if to divide it in half, was a line of stone sculptures, with the emperor sculpture set front and center. Next to it were statues of nymphs, surrounded by baskets of blooming flowers that added a pleasant aroma to the steam.



And most of all, beyond the steam and the statues was a stunning, grand view of the mountains. Each one was topped by a crown of snow and donned an emerald cloak of conifer trees with cuffs of silvery mist.

Standing composed like ancient dragons, they rested alongside Mount Wyrmnest like vassals obeying their queen, with a breathtaking sky serving as the backdrop to their beautiful ridgelines. While this facility was outfitted with the latest technology, much of its interior retained the elegant, extravagant design of the ancient times. This window offered a clear view of this affluent location.

The majesty of this land of misty peaks likely hadn't changed in the last thousand years. Its magnificence was everlasting.

"I can understand your desire to frolic about this place, and yet..." Frederica gave an exaggerated sigh.

"It really is amazing... This isn't so much a bath as it is a heated swimming pool."

Anju spoke as she slipped into the water with elegant, reserved motions that seemed to deliberately contrast Kurena's splash landing. Minding her hair—which she'd tied up so it wouldn't get wet—she stretched her slender arms.

"Yes, it feels nice. It's a bit lukewarm, but it's just the right temperature for enjoying a long soak."

"I think it's called a hot spring? They draw this hot water up from a geothermal spring in the mountain. And in the past, all this belonged to a single emperor. Can you believe it...?"

Michihi lamented as she scooped up the murky water in her hands. She gazed vacantly with her dark-black Orianta eyes at the subtle relief carved into the rock dome.

"How many people can fit into this place at once...? Makes you wonder, doesn't it? Though I guess that's a commoner's way of thinking..."

Annette spoke, leaning her back against the edge of the bath where a rose-vine relief had been carved—likely to prevent guests from slipping. Her silver

eyes surveyed the area, watching the several dozen other girls either bathing or playing in the water of the bathhouse.

It was the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package's 1st Armored Division, which was made up of the first hundred or so Eighty-Six to join. And these girls were the survivors of that batch. They were in the right half of the bathhouse, which was divided by the statue column. But even with so many of them in just one half of the bath, there was still plenty of space.

Shiden, who was reclining near her, combed her wet crimson hair and shrugged.

"Well, if Princess Annette is gonna start calling herself a commoner, we Eighty-Six are gonna have even fewer spaces to occupy, huh?"

"I'll have you know I'm effectively homeless at the moment. Meanwhile, you guys were adopted by top government officials, even if only on paper. Your social standing's probably higher than mine right now."

Annette responded to Shiden's quip with a sarcastic jab of her own. The Eighty-Six were the oppressed, and the Alba were their oppressors. But that line became blurred within the Strike Package, and more and more people on either side had grown used to referring to one another by name.

And speaking of other Alba, Annette turned around, looking at the mosaic tile arch located at the bathhouse's entrance. Standing there was a lone silhouette trembling like a newborn fawn.

"Lenaaa. Don't just stand there—come on in!"

Lena jolted and recoiled upon hearing her name. She quickly hid in the shadow of one of the basket-carrying statues.

"B-but..."

An ancient statue made in a girl's image was far too small and slender for a real person to hide behind. But Lena just barely managed to do it, fidgeting all the while. After all...

"...I'm not used to seeing other people so exposed..."

She did both her schooling and her training for the Republic military while

commuting from home and had no experience living in dormitories. Even in the Federacy, Lena had a personal bathroom attached to her room in their base. And while she had used public showers a few times during the large-scale offensive and when receiving aid from the Federacy, those still had separated booths.

Never before had she walked around with this much skin exposed—and certainly not in such an open space full of other people. Annette simply scoffed at her predicament, though. In her nervousness, Lena kept fidgeting and rubbing her thighs together, resulting in a sight that was far more sensual than she had probably intended. Annette seriously wanted her to stop it. She could sense that a door to another world was on the verge of opening.

“And you think I am? Besides, wearing swimsuits is mandatory here. It’s not like we’re naked, so I don’t think you need to be so bashful.”

“Well, yes, but this place... It’s in plain view...!”

Surrounding the bath and the statues was a cluster of ancient pillars, and beyond it was a view of the snowy mountain peaks. In other words, there was nothing impeding the view into this bathhouse from the outside.

After all, this place was originally a villa for the emperor of Giad, and those of Imperial descent did not view their servants or the populace as equals. As such, they weren’t ashamed of being seen bathing by their servants, in much the same way one wouldn’t feel embarrassed about being naked in front of an insect.

Worse yet, because extra measures were taken to make the view from inside the bathhouse clear and breathtaking, the visibility from outside was also quite good. Of course, if the windows had been fully transparent, the air in the bathhouse would have been colder, so they were made from insulated, double-paned glass. But they were designed not to cloud over too easily from the steam, so the view was still quite clear.

This view from their location meant anyone looking in would have to do so from the other side of the mountain, but that did little to ease Lena’s anxiety.

“And well... They’re...they’re right there...”

“Yes, but we’re wearing swimsuits.”

Annette resolutely cut down Lena’s arguments before suddenly smirking at her.

“And despite your shrinking-violet act, you sure picked a raunchy swimsuit. Is this the one we bought together before?”

“A-Annette...!”

Annette grinned at her broadly.

“What’s wrong? Go ahead and show off. Like you said, he’s right there.”

“Annette!”

Lena’s rosy cheeks grew even redder at Annette’s teasing. Pure-white strings were tied along the back and waist of Lena’s brand-new bikini. When Grethe had informed them of this event and told them to bring swimsuits for the bathhouse, Lena took the day off with Annette, Kurena, Anju, and Shiden, and they went on a trip to buy some.

They all screeched and chattered and compared figures. It was a fun outing, but Lena also looked forward to actually wearing hers during the trip. To that end, she bought what struck her as the most appropriate swimsuit for today.

...But that didn’t mean she had *intentionally* picked a “raunchy” one...

And besides, Annette bought her own swimsuit after a great deal of deliberation, too. Hers was an orange bikini that contrasted her naturally pale skin and silver hair. Kurena, who was floating in the water nearby, chose an emerald-green bikini with a strapless top, which accentuated her thighs and chest.

Anju’s swimsuit was light blue and, surprisingly enough, covered her chest entirely below the neck and stopped just below her bust. It did cling to her skin, however, displaying the curvature of her breasts. Frederica, in an endearing attempt to appear more mature, wore a frilly black children’s bikini.

Michihi wore a red-and-gold bikini that accentuated her shoulders as a nod to her Orienta roots. And as if to contrast Michihi’s ivory skin tone, Shiden’s swimsuit boldly showed off her assets as the most developed member of the

group with the darkest skin. It was a tiny black bikini that left little to the imagination.

And so, Lena thought, it wasn't that her choice of swimsuit was particularly racy or erotic compared with the rest. Swimsuits were naturally designed to show the lines of one's body to begin with, and she knew they'd be going into a hot bath, so she deliberately picked one that left her skin as exposed as possible.

The thought of her being seen like this, or rather, what *he* might think if he were to see her, hadn't crossed her mind.

It's not like...I want him to see me like this... I wasn't...thinking about that...

But Lena managed to muster her courage and, after giving a brief nod, took a vigorous step forward, only to...

"Aaaah?!"

Having stepped forward too enthusiastically, Lena's foot landed right on a bar of soap—made in a citrus-yellow color, specifically so it would be easy to see—and she slipped.

"Ah, Lena, are you okay?!"

"O-ow, ouch..."

"Ah, wait, wait, Lena, don't stand up! They came undone! The strings came undone!"

"Huh? No...! Wh-which strings...?"

"...You're so tightly wound, Your Majesty. Can't you at least tie these properly?"

"Ah, stop thrashing around; I'll tie them for you. Geez."

".....You know, guys..."

Hearing the screams that were coming from the other side of the emperor statue, Theo grumbled with a sigh. His consciousness kept getting drawn to the sound of splashing water, but he forced himself not to look.

"...I was kind of used to this ever since the Eighty-Sixth Sector. Honestly, it's a

long time coming with Kurena. But seriously, I'm at my limit. Can't they keep it down? Or at least choose their words more carefully before they scream them?"

"It's not like we don't exist just because they can't see us..." Raiden muttered wearily, his gaze fixed on the ceiling.

Rito was already beet red despite having only entered the water a short while ago, and Dustin kept his eyes covered with his hand. Marcel sang a Federacy marching tune to himself in a trembling voice, desperate to drown the girls' voices out.

The boys' presence likely made it obvious, but they were in a mixed bath. The statues dividing the bathhouse weren't put there to act as a partition. They were just for decoration.

So if the boys simply turned around, they would notice that the area the girls were occupying was only a short walk away. If they were to stand up, they'd be able to see everything beyond the statues. The washing areas between the statues were for everyone as well, of course.

Incidentally, the cultural sphere of the continent's northern regions—which included this hotel and the Federacy—often had bathhouses that offered mixed bathing with swimsuits. As such, the girls naturally inhabited the right side of the emperor statue, but the boys were forced to sit on the left side, paralyzed with fear.

In the Eighty-Sixth Sector, girls had a much lower survival rate than the boys, and there were fewer girls than boys here, too. But even with the bathhouse being large enough to house a bomber jet, somehow it felt extremely cramped with half of the bath occupied by girls. The atmosphere was beyond awkward, and the boys all wore complicated expressions.

Putting aside Yuuto, who had a blank expression almost all the time, even Shin, who rarely had much of a reaction to most things, and Vika, who was utterly incapable of reading the mood, were completely silent.

The atmosphere was unbearable.

"I'm technically on duty, so it's different for me. But you're all on vacation... I

can't see how this is relaxing," Vika said.

"Next time, we should swap time slots with them..."

But switching time slots with the girls wasn't actually a reliable solution. Shin got the feeling that trying to do so with Lena would actually make him run into her instead. And that led to another train of thought...

It was then that Theo regarded Shin with a nasty catlike grin.

"You still alive, Shin? What's on your mind, bud?"

"...Shut up."

Theo's eyes were fixed on Shin, who remained absolutely silent and refused to look back at him. The changing rooms in this bathhouse were all booths. And since this was a mixed bath, the exit from the locker rooms led straight out to the bath. As such, there was only one exit. And that was where Shin had run into Lena, completely by accident.

To reiterate, they were all obligated to wear swimsuits. The two of them were by no means naked. And it wasn't as if the barracks in the Eighty-Sixth Sector showed any regard for separation between genders. Having lived there for years, the Eighty-Six had developed some degree of immunity to seeing the opposite sex naked. That was the case for Shin and Theo, at the very least.

But Lena wasn't an Eighty-Six.

And worse yet, she had no male siblings and had lost her father when she was still very young. She grew up a sheltered, affluent girl, with her only friend close to her age being Annette.

In that moment, Lena had frozen. Shin had been at a loss for words. And then Lena had gone red up to her ears, yelped incoherently, and run off to the other side of the bathhouse. It was quite the impressive scream, actually; it echoed throughout the entire facility.

This was the fundamental reason why Lena was currently being so bashful. She'd become keenly aware of the fact that she was surrounded by members of the opposite sex in swimsuits and that she herself was walking around essentially half naked. And Shin was left quite shocked by her suddenly blushing

and running away screaming. As such, he'd been quieter than usual ever since.

Or...maybe the source of that silence wasn't actually shock.

"So it was a string bikini, huh?"

"Shut. Up."

Shin retorted immediately. He had put the image from his mind. Or rather, he was *trying* not to remember. If he didn't consciously restrain himself, the memory would resurface. He'd apparently gotten a real eyeful in that one moment.

"Lena's pretty bold, too."

"Who cares?"

"...Were they big?"

In less than a second, Shin's bloodred eyes had become so intense, they seemed ready to burn a hole in Theo's face. Without wasting a second, Shin grabbed Theo—who had failed to evade his grasp—by the head and forcefully dunked it in the water.

The girls suddenly heard the sound of splashing coming from the other side of the sculpture, where Shin and the other boys were.

"...Bfwah! Geez, Shin, I know that one was my bad, but stop resorting to lethal force at the drop of a hat!"

"My hand slipped."

"What the hell was that clichéd, monotone excuse? At least try to come up with something believable!"

"Theo, don't tease him. He's got zero chill when it comes to stuff like that."

"No, no. This is quite entertaining, so I would like to see how far he might go. Do be a noble sacrifice, Rikka."

"Wow, Vika, what the hell?"

They could be heard teasing one another and playfully arguing from the other side of the statues.

“...Guess the boys are having their own fun,” Annette said, frowning her brows.

“S-so long as they’re happy...,” Lena muttered, submerged in the water down to her mouth after having secured her *frontal armor* in place.

The fact that they could hear Shin and the boys so clearly made Lena worry that her own commotion earlier might have reached their ears, too. And if it did...

They heard me during such a...shameful moment... How embarrassing...

Looking over the two of them and Anju, who happened to be standing between them, Shana cocked her head to the side.

“Hey.”

As the three of them turned to stare at her questioningly, Shana looked from one of them to the next before parting her lips.

“You’re all standing in size order.”

The three of them exchanged gazes at those words. *Size* didn’t seem to refer to their hair length. It wasn’t height, either, since Anju was the tallest. So that meant...

The three of them, as well as the rest of the girls nearby, looked down at their individual bosoms, wrapped in colorful fabric and floating in the steamy water.

Then came a moment of silence...

...after which all the girls scrambled to their feet and started comparing bust sizes.

“Aaah, I’m bigger than Anju but smaller than Lena!”

“And I’m bigger than Annette but smaller than Shana... Hmm.”

“Whoa... Impressive, Shiden. There’s no beating you...!”

“Who’re you calling small?! I’m average!”

“That’s right! If Annette’s small, what does that make me?!”

“I already knew about Kurena, but even Lena’s bigger than me... Aw, I’ve been

trying not to let it get to me, but it's so frustrating..."

"Th-these things just get in the way! It hurts when they move around too much, especially in battle. And they just get hot in the summer! And they're murder on my shoulders!"

"Silence, fools! Why do you all insist on pushing my buttons?! This is an outrage! A personal attack!" yelled Frederica, feeling left out.

"Quiet, munchkin. Come back when you've got *anything at all* to add to the convo."

The friendly buzz continued as the girls arranged themselves by size. Was there a point to any of this? Who could say...?

"All right, let's see what you're working with, Lena—D-damn, they're huge... What do you eat to get a pair like that?!"

"H-huh? Stop it; don't push me...! Now, listen here!"

Lena protested as she tried to shake off the Processors pushing her from behind and into the spot near Shiden and Kurena. She spoke desperately with the girls grabbing both her arms.

"I know we're on vacation, but you're being too carefree! We may have the entire hotel rented out, but, er, right next to us..."

Shin was on the other side of the emperor statue, close enough to hear their voices and even see them, if he stood up.

"Th-the boys are right there! So act a little more modest, if you please!"

"Yeah, listen to her! We *really* want you to knock it off!" Theo cried out, unable to put up with the girls' shenanigans any longer.

Sadly, Lena was the only one who seemed to hear him—or rather, the only one who listened. The girls' clear, high-pitched laughter echoed off the ceiling.

Eventually, one idiot climbed over the emperor statue and stuck her face out.

"We hear ya loud and clear, fellas! But deep down, you're dying to sneak a peek, riiiiight?!"

It was Shiden, waving with a radiant grin that resembled her usual crocodile

smirk. And while they couldn't deny they wanted to hear more of what the girls were talking about...it was also common courtesy to pretend they didn't. And so they desperately tried to ignore her.

Yet the very subject of the girls' discussion was now hanging heavily over the laurel wreath atop the emperor's head, effectively thrust out before them, two heaving reminders of the things they were actively trying not to think about.

"C'mon, guys, where are my cheers? At least whistle or somethi—Bfah!"

Before Shiden could finish her sentence, Shin picked up a bucket and threw it at her, hitting her square in the forehead. Her fingers let go of the emperor statue, and she fell back into the water with a bombastic splash. He'd done it swiftly after she'd appeared, leaving Raiden torn between shock and exasperation. The fact that he'd launched his attack as soon as he spotted her was impressive in and of itself, but...

"...Seriously, man. Shiden's the one person you show absolutely no mercy to."

Shana's cool, collected voice reached them from behind the statue.

"Sorry, Shin. Giving Shiden attention at times like this just gets her excited, so ignore her."

Shiden remained completely submerged, bubbling her complaints up to the surface. They couldn't make out what she was saying, naturally, but it was probably something along the lines of *I'll show you excited! Sleep with one eye open*. All in attendance hoped she would settle down soon.

"But yeah, all things considered, I did think hers were pretty big..." Marcel muttered as he looked off in a random direction.

Revealing swimsuit aside, Shiden's chest was so large that she was able to turn heads when wearing her uniform—and even her panzer jacket. The heavy-duty jacket was partially bulletproof and crafted to withstand high Gs during intense operations. The fact that the curvature of her bust was visible even beneath such dense material was nothing short of incredible.

The thought of it seemed to have stirred something in Marcel, because he clenched his fists excitedly.

“I mean, come on! Guys love big boobs! Haven’t you seen statues of goddesses? You know what they all have? That’s right! Huge tits!”

“I have to disagree with you there. In my opinion, they’re the best when they fit perfectly in the palm of your hand.”

“...Wow, Yuuto, didn’t expect you to chime in. And seriously, change your facial expression every once in a while, will ya? Especially during a conversation like this.”

“Dustin... On second thought, I don’t need to ask you. But what about you, Nouzen? I believe now’s as good a time as any to ask.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!” yelled Dustin.

“Size isn’t all that matters. But just because they don’t care that we’re here doesn’t mean we should be talking about this while they’re within earshot,” said Shin.

“You say that, but you should be careful, too, Shin. I’m pretty sure you just sank poor Kurena with that comment. Like, literally sank her.”

With that, Raiden cast a sidelong glance at Kurena, floating in the water and foaming at the mouth, like she’d caught a stray bullet. Shin largely ignored her, though a bit of guilt crept onto his face.

“Well, you have the right idea. We should probably revisit this topic during a nighttime chat, hackneyed as it is.”

“Uh... So you’re telling me you’re looking forward to talking about girls well into the night, Prince...?”

Rito groaned as if his dreams had just been mercilessly trampled. Vika ignored him, but another idiot soon crawled out of the woodwork, stepping away from the wall where she’d been standing by.

“Leave it to me, Your Highness! Incompetent though I may be, I, Lerche, shall set out in search of a suitable topic for you to discuss—Huh?! ”

Swiftly picking up the bucket that had hit Shiden earlier, Vika wordlessly tossed it at Lerche’s forehead. True to his background as a prince of a militant country, he lobbed an incredibly strong fastball, thrown with perfect form.

“Shut up, you seven-year-old. You don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

“M-my shame knows no bounds...”

Lerche squatted and cradled the spot where it connected, despite being unable to feel pain. She stood out in the bathhouse since she was dressed in her uniform as usual. The Eighty-Six had already gotten used to seeing her, but Lerche wasn’t human. She was a drone component in human form. She may have looked like a living, breathing girl, but her body’s interior was as mechanical as a Feldreß.

She wasn’t perfectly waterproof and was therefore unable to go into the water, and so she’d been standing at the corner of the bathhouse, holding a tray that offered extra towels, soap, and a pitcher full of a cold drink as well as ice.

...And while it was entirely irrelevant, the boys couldn’t help but wonder about how the Sirins’ bodies were designed, with the exception of their heads. Their hair colors and the quasi-nerve crystals in their foreheads aside, their faces were indistinguishable from humans’, but if they were no different from real women under their clothes, too, it would be rather...well...creepy.

“It’s interesting how, um...girls are more open with those kinds of topics.”

Dustin bluntly changed the subject.

Everyone’s faces asked the question *You’re bringing up something that dangerous?* which caused Dustin to flinch.

“Er... You do realize they pretty much always talk about stuff like that... When we’re not around...,” Rito whispered.

“They’re talking about it right now, actually.”

“Yeah, they’re saying stuff like *Muscles are hot* and *Necks are hot*. I can hear ‘em pretty clearly.”

The girls on the other side of the statue, who were eavesdropping on the boys’ conversation, nodded sagely.

“Oh yeah, muscles are hot.”

“Yep. And although we hardly get to see them, I like how nice and firm calves and ankles look.”

“For me, it’s all about the nape of the neck... I mean, shoulders are pretty hot in general, too. But that line that extends from the shoulders to the back is just... Mmm.”

“Oh, and I only saw this for the first time when I came to the Federacy, but I love the way a guy’s hand looks while it’s holding a cigarette! That’s the good stuff!”

“I’ll give you that, but arms are where it’s at. Heh. Like when a guy’s sweaty, and he rolls up his sleeves, and you can make out his tan lines... The way the veins bulge...”

“Veins are pretty hot.”

“And scars are really cool. The ones that look like the wounds were really painful are kinda...not... Buuuut when you can kind of imagine the expressions they made when they were in pain... Unf...”

“I mean, even the boys are comparing scars and showing off.”

I got this one while fighting in this place or I got this one when a Löwe busted my rig or I got this one climbing the fence in the internment camp. These were the kinds of stories only the Eighty-Six could look back on fondly.

The girls had no idea what reasoning there was for them to go from dirty talk to stories about how they got their scars, but such was the nature of idle chatter. The boys likely didn’t know how it came to this, either.

But that reminded Lena of how scarred Shin’s body was, which made her grimace. Grizzly scars—some probably as old as seven years—marred his flesh. The most notable of them all was the one around his neck. Lena never asked how he got it, but every one of those scars was a silent reminder of the countless battles and injuries he’d endured. Most of them were probably mementos from the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

...And incidentally, despite having run away screaming, she did...get a good look at him, too...(as immodest as it was). And the moment she realized this, Lena’s face went red again. She’d noticed things like the clear distinction

between his natural skin tone and the tan marks that stood as evidence of his long time on the battlefield. His lean, muscular frame.

He would likely stop growing soon, but there could be no doubt that his body was maturing into that of a remarkably handsome man. Even on the occasions where he'd caught her eye while wearing his normal uniform, it was hard to ignore the fact that his body and hers were like night and day. His skeletal structure, his muscles, the texture of his skin... Her eyes couldn't help but wander.

And while she was lost in those thoughts...

"Lenaaaaa?"

She looked up to see the Eighty-Six girls—who had been scattered across the bath until now—closing in on her like a group of cats cornering helpless prey.

"Hmm...?" Lena stiffened.

They were close, and there were a lot of them. And their eyes seemed to glint as they scrutinized her. Lena was...quite intimidated.

"Your skin looks so smooth, Lena."

"No tan lines, no scars... Could I feel for myself?"

"Don't worry; it'll only be a second. Just a few pokes. Okay?"

"Ah, er, w-wait, I, aaah..."

Lena's half-hearted attempt at resistance was steamrolled in an instant. Hands extended from every direction, poking, rubbing, and caressing her skin. Lena could only let out small squeals. And Lena then realized that the boys had, once again, fallen silent.

With the boys slightly dizzy from the whole ordeal, and with the girls even more exhausted than before they entered the bath (thanks to playing around so much), they all left the facility and spent some time lounging in the reception hall.

This annex was made using the ancient building, with a peristyle inner courtyard that was recently closed off with a glass ceiling. Now that this place had been made into a hotel, it served as a rest spot. There were many large

couches that allowed one to two people to recline comfortably.

The sofas were spacious enough that there would be no need for a tight squeeze between the seats, and they were adorned with lambswool that felt as soft as a cloud. The reception hall was cooled by air-conditioning, and waiters dressed in the Alliance's national outfits walked across the room, carrying trays with pitchers full of cold drinks and glasses.

The sofas were soft enough to sink into, and the fur spread over them was pleasant to the touch. Overcome by temptation, Shin closed his eyes but then lifted his surprisingly heavy eyelids for fear of falling asleep. Some part of him felt like he was growing complacent, but that didn't mean he intended to stop relaxing.

A month or so had passed since the Dragon Fang Mountain operation in the United Kingdom ended. This time, their detachment was exempt from operational activity, which also meant they had a break from their curriculum in the special officer training. As such, even Shin knew he'd be better off adopting a mindset tamer than the one that kept him alive on the battlefield. Especially since he realized this was a place chosen for them to get some much-needed rest.

They were in the territory of the Alliance of Wald, a mountainous state located along the Federacy's southwestern border. To be specific, they were in a health-resort hotel located in its second capital, Hesturn. This state boasted the tallest mountain in the continent, the sacred Mount Wyrmnest, which served as the heart of the confederacy of small countries. What little flatlands existed between the peaks housed these small countries.

Given its small amount of habitable land and meager population, all citizens—men and women alike—were charged with the duty of conscription. This policy of universal conscription afforded the state considerable military might. Seven hundred years ago, it had gained independence from the Giadian Empire.

In place of a monarch, a council was formed from the influential people of each country in the confederacy. One hundred and sixty years ago, they granted all their civilians voting rights, shifting to a Republic rule—a full century after the Republic of San Magnolia set that precedent.

“...May I sit next to you?”

Shin looked up, knowing full well that the voice belonged to Lena. He gave her the okay with a simple gesture, and she took a seat next to him on the sofa. Her long silver hair was still a bit wet. And as she parted her lips, she seemed bashful for a reason Shin couldn't identify.

“I'm sorry about what happened earlier. Er, I mean, screaming all of a sudden...”

“...It's fine.”

In Shin's opinion, the conversation that came afterward was far worse. But bringing it up now would only dig him a deeper grave. A female attendant approached them, her high-laced shoes clicking audibly against the floor. With practiced, flowing motions, she extended a glass container toward them.

“Would you care for some ice cream? ...You've played around quite a bit, so you must be in the mood for something cold.”

Owing to the multiple countries between the mountains that constituted the Alliance, there were several ethnic groups that composed the state's population. The largest of them were the blue-eyed Caerulea. This attendant was likely mixed with L'asile blood, judging by her dark-blond hair and the near-indigo shade of her eyes. She wore a dress that incorporated the green hues of the forest the hotel was built in, accented with brilliant red.

“This pitcher contains condensed milk. It's the Alliance's special product. We have many dairy farms, so we take great pride in the quality of our dairy products. We hope you enjoy it.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank you very much.”

Shin and Lena both thanked the attendant and accepted the drink she offered. The lady beamed at them.

“Sadly, in these trying times, there isn't much in the way of food variety. So we hope you don't mind the limited selection.”

The Alliance of Wald was a mountainous country. The peaks were so steep

that, to this day, railroads had a hard time making it to this nation, and the elevated rock face of its territory meant there was hardly any arable land. What little agriculture they could manage was present only in the valleys, which wasn't nearly enough to support the population's needs.

Normally, a country in such a position would turn to technology and trade to compensate through importation. And indeed, the Alliance relied on trade to resolve its food shortages. But when the Legion War broke out, each of the continent's countries became isolated.

This was a grave problem for the Alliance, which had effectively been cut off from its food supply chain. While their situation wasn't quite as extreme as the Republic's—which had nearly 100 percent of its food synthesized from factories—the Alliance did have to rely quite heavily on factory food production to feed its population.

Shin and Lena were offered frozen fruit with condensed milk and ornate shaved ice cream that melted the moment it entered their mouths. It was unbelievably fresh and slightly earthy. As Lena brought a spoonful to her mouth, her eyes shot open.

"This is so tasty...! To say nothing of that delightful woodsy aroma. I wonder how they achieved that."

"I think they used pine leaves," Shin answered.

"Pine leaves? Oh..."

Lena squinted curiously at her spoonful of ice cream.

"The cuisines in different countries sure do vary... It's the first time I've ever had food that included pine needles among its ingredients."

"I agree with that first statement, but I've seen them used as a substitute for tea leaves in order to neutralize the odor from meat back in the Federacy. We even used them in the Eighty-Sixth Sector."

The Eighty-Six were originally citizens of the Republic of San Magnolia, though Shin was loath to acknowledge that fact. Using pine leaves for tea was probably integrated into the Republic's culture, as well.

“That could be, but...” Lena puffed out her cheeks grumpily.

“Maybe you should come visit the Eighty-Sixth Sector someday, Lena. You can enjoy our lovely view of the rubble and appreciate the synthesized food.”

Lena noticed his joking tone, of course.

“Oh, I know all about it. I had to eat it so many times during the large-scale offensive.”

“And what did it remind you of? I won’t be upset by your answer, so be honest.”

“Hmm... Well, it was...”

It was one of the Eighty-Six’s long-running jokes. Stifling a giggle, Lena pretended to ponder the answer for a moment, and then...

““Plastic explosives,”” they said in unison.

Lena chuckled, which made Shin’s lips curl into a smile. But her laughter soon died down, and she narrowed her eyes. The hall they were in was once a courtyard, but by now, the ceiling was outfitted with glass arrayed in a geometric pattern. The light streamed in through the glass, adorning the white floor with a glow in that shape’s form. The colors changed subtly depending on the time of day. It was an intangible beauty—art made of light.

That transient glow reflected in Lena’s eyes.

“This place really is lovely. It’s quiet... And no matter where you look, the scenery is gorgeous.”

“...”

As small as the Alliance’s territory was, the health resort that housed this hotel was far from the front lines. This was where the world’s first polypedal drone—the original Feldreß—was developed. Years ago, this state’s mountain denizens used these weapons to stave off fifteen tank divisions sent by the Empire. And they remained stalwart even when faced with the threat of the Legion.

And thanks to that, the flames of war ultimately did not reach this land. There was no cannon fire echoing in the distance. No buzzing from the hangars. Even

the Legion's incessant wailing felt distant here. Shin couldn't get used to this silence.

The tumult of war was the constant backdrop of his daily life. The roar of artillery never stopped, and the scent of machine oil and smoke always hung in the air. A cloud of sand and battle dust always hung over the world. Because that was his version of "normal," the idea of people enjoying this constant serenity was entirely alien to him.

But even so... He began to feel that even he could relax here.

"Yes... I agree."

There were still a few hours before dinner, and Lena returned to her guest room in the hotel every now and then to pick up things she would need while bathing. Lena and Annette shared the room, but Annette hadn't come back yet. Their beds had been made while they were out; when Lena got back, she happily dived onto the clean, straightened sheets and lounged for a long moment.

She was still a bit light-headed from the bath. Maybe she'd simply had too much fun. Whatever the reason, as soon as she was alone again, all the tension drained from her body, and the pleasant softness muddled her consciousness. TP, whom she left behind in the room, tottered over to her and greeted her with a familiar high-pitched meow.

Lena couldn't take it along for their assignment in the United Kingdom. Not seeing Lena or Shin for over two months made the black cat a bit clingier than it had been before. Feeling TP make itself comfortable on her stomach, Lena leisurely petted it with one hand, and it purred with satisfaction.

As her consciousness began to wane, she thought back on the events leading up to today and eventually stopped on a certain memory. She recalled the words Shin told her after her encounter with the Phönix on the frozen battlefield of the United Kingdom.

Desperate words, like those of a lost child. Words that exposed his weakness and pain but also contained his most fervent desire.

I'll come back, for sure. So don't leave me behind.

I want to show you the sea.

...So is it safe to assume...he thinks of me that way...?

The moment the thought crossed her mind, Lena was overcome with shame. She covered her cheeks with her hands as she started rolling around on the bed.

Am I reading too much into it...?

But *that* meaning was the only one that made sense. *I'll come back, for sure*, he'd said. *So don't leave me behind*, he'd said... *I want to show you the sea*, he'd said. If he didn't mean it that way, how else was she supposed to interpret this?!

But... No...I'm definitely getting ahead of myself...

In the days leading up to this vacation period, Shin spent his time studying in the town adjacent to their base. Lena, who'd already finished her higher education, was enrolled as a student there as well for some reason, so they frequently studied together. And through their increased interaction, Shin seemed to have come to terms with his emotions somewhat. He started smiling more often and would joke around occasionally.

For Lena, this was a truly pleasant, unforgettable school life, but...the whole time, Shin never once mentioned that wish of his. The raw emotion he displayed when he first made it was nowhere to be found.

And so Lena concluded that she was just overthinking things. Yet she couldn't come up with any other explanation for what he could have meant... And every time she thought about it, she would feel conflicted.

Massaging her flushed cheeks, Lena rolled around in bed some more.

When Shin and Lena had that exchange, they were in the middle of an operation and weren't in a state of mind to confirm how they felt. But at this point, Lena thought that if she had to feel this way about it, she should have talked it out with him calmly as soon as the operation ended...

Wait, after the operation? Talk it out with him—calmly? No, no, I couldn't; I can't do that! No, no, no, it's so embarrassing! I can't ask him that!

What if I...?

I asked him...

...and it turns out I had it all wrong...?!

Lena rolled left and right atop her bed, her hands clasped in front of her flushed face. She was so anxious and afraid that if she didn't keep moving, she felt like she'd go crazy. To begin with, she was so occupied with Shin's feelings, enough to become self-conscious and embarrassed...

How do I feel about Shin...?



The door to her room swung open with a clank.

“I’m back, Lena. They handed out some lemon water. You want some? I’m pretty sure the lemon is synthesized, but the mint is the real thing. Wait...”

Looking down at her, Annette gazed at Lena dubiously.

“...What are you doing?”

“Annette...!” Lena peered up at her friend, desperate.

Her bed was a mess, and the silver, lustrous locks she’d thoroughly combed earlier were awfully frayed.

“Annette, I... How do you think Shin feels about me...?”

Annette fell silent for a long moment before eventually heaving out a long, deep sigh. As if to release some inner pressure that had built up inside her.

“...Lena.”

“Urgh...”

“Knowing you for as long as I have, I get that you’re a total ditz, but I think I’m entitled to smack you this time. Don’t you?”

“.....I’m sorry.”

TP meowed shrilly in what was a cry that came off as both affirming and utterly indifferent.

Shin returned to his room, feeling a bit dizzy. Some part of him also felt that he couldn’t afford to become too complacent. As soon as he entered the room, a certain recollection surfaced vaguely in his mind. Staring up at the artistically arranged wooden ceiling, Shin pursued that memory.

It was a conversation he had a few days ago with his comrades, during their time at the special officer academy. It was over mundane, trivial things, and it was odd that the memory had crept up on him in the first place. It was an altogether unremarkable scene.

But eventually, it was Lena who occupied the majority of that recollection. Their exchange a month ago in the United Kingdom. The words he’d uttered.

...Don't leave me behind.

He had to own up to the facts... He had to stop turning a blind eye to the truth. He had to admit that he'd faced his true desires head-on... That he'd realized what would allow him to keep living, even if it was a lie.

His feelings for Lena.

The thought made Shin feel awkward, and he let his head crash against the pillow. It wasn't an emotion he was familiar with, and that made it much harder to deal with. It put him in a fidgety, restless sort of mood. He didn't know what to do with himself.

He was afraid—no doubt about it—and couldn't bring himself to take the next step. If someone were to call him a coward for it, he would have no choice but to agree. Over the days they spent studying during their time off, he'd intended to talk to Lena about it several times, but in the end, he couldn't say anything. Recalling his inaction only served to make him more depressed.

Shin didn't quite know when he started feeling that way. Before he knew it, she had taken up permanent residence in his heart. And when they reunited and started fighting together on the same battlefield, the spot she occupied gradually grew larger. To the point where he couldn't delude himself anymore.

And once he'd become aware of this emotion, he couldn't go back to being ignorant of it any longer. Searching his memories, he realized that all he had ever done was selfishly shove his wishes into her hands. *Remember us. Live on. Don't leave me behind.*

She'd granted all those wishes, and he felt like he couldn't allow himself to take advantage of her kindness any longer.

I want to show you the sea. I want to see the sea, with you.

And now that he realized who he truly made that wish for...

"—n."

But even still, that wish was Shin's selfish desire. Lena had answered all his wishes so far, but there was no reason she would have to answer this one, too.

"...Shin."

She could reject him, after all.

“Yo, Shin.”

And besides, for how much she’d supported him so far, he had nothing to offer in return. That being the case...

“Hey, dumbass, I’m talking to you.”

Shin jolted and looked around, only for his eyes to settle on Raiden, who’d apparently returned to his room at some point. He was standing in front of the door, making a face Shin had never seen before. He looked exasperated and fed up all at once. As if he’d been forced to swallow some kind of dessert he deeply detested.

“...What?”

“You know...,” Raiden said, heaving a heavy sigh. “You’ve really changed, man.”



The Alliance’s food industry was supplemented with synthetic substitutes and vegetables raised on artificial growth accelerants. But given that they’d had to rely on the production plants to compensate for their food supply even before the war, its quality was comparatively quite good.

Since the state had relied on trade to feed its people since time immemorial, their cuisine had a mixture of styles. This resulted in flavors that were a combo of the north-central regions of the continent as well as the south. The Eighty-Six and Lena were all quite taken with the unusual dishes they were given and happily dug into their dinners. The waiters at each table regarded them with satisfied smiles.

Much like the Federacy (and in contrast to the Republic and the United Kingdom), the Alliance preferred coffee over tea. And so they sipped cups of coffee substitute—which bore a different aroma from the one they knew in the Federacy—along with their dessert and let out content sighs.

It was then that a silver shadow stood at the entrance of the great hall where they ate.

“It’s time, everyone.”

Short blond hair and lips painted a brilliant shade of red. Contrasting the teenagers filling the room, Grethe wore a distinctive silver uniform. The atmosphere immediately grew strained as a few people stood in response to her call. Lena was one of them. Regarding the table with a nod, she left her seat.

As they walked, Anju, Kurena, and Frederica called out to her. *Good luck out there. Do your best. Do not strain yourself too much.* She went back to her room, opened the closet, and found her trunk. Unlocking it, she took out a certain set of clothes and put them on. Ultramarine with golden rims—the uniform of the Republic. The soldier’s outfit she hadn’t worn for over a month, ever since her time off began.

Putting it on for the first time in so long made her switch gears naturally. Brushing her argent locks back, she left the room with Annette, who wore the same uniform. They went down to the hotel lobby, where they met Grethe, who awaited them with Shin, Vika, and Lerche. Each of them was clad in their respective uniforms. Steel blue, dark violet, and rouge.

“Sorry for the wait.”

“Don’t mention it... Let’s go, then.”

Curling her famously crimson lips into a smile, Grethe turned around and led the group outside. Lena and Annette followed closely behind her, with Shin and Vika behind them and Lerche bringing up the rear.

They stopped before a pair of double doors. A doorman who also doubled as a porter stood there, dressed in an elegant, antiquated uniform. He regarded them with an exemplary salute that contrasted his outfit before opening the doors for them. This was yet another reminder of how the Alliance was a state of universal conscription, where men and women were all equally recruited to the military.

At the porch, they found a large vehicle waiting for them. It was painted in a drab olive and sooty brown, forestlike camouflage colors. On both the front and rear doors was the emblem of a mountain goat, its horns pointing up proudly toward the heavens. The driver and his assistant got off the vehicle and opened

the doors to the back seat, inviting Lena and the others inside.

This was a vehicle for transporting personnel and supplies along the rear, beyond the reach of enemy fire. It easily had room for at least ten people. The doors closed, and the engine soon roared to life. The vehicle smoothly cruised away.

Looking outside, they saw Theo shift away the curtain of the window to wave good-bye to them from the other side of the tinted glass.

“My apologies for calling you here to help, Lieutenant Colonel Idinarohk, Captain Nouzen. Normally, we wouldn’t have combat personnel help us here...”

“Don’t worry about it.”

As most of the Alliance’s cities were built along what little flatland was nestled between its mountains, a short drive was all it took for their field of vision to be obstructed by greenery. With the exception of the moonlight, there was nothing to brighten up the trees, whose spear-like tops pointed up into the night sky.

When that darkness enveloped the vehicle, Grethe parted her lips to speak, and Shin simply shook his head lightly. Lena and Annette were only coming along as witnesses, but the ones who were actually called in to play a role in what was to come were Shin and Vika.

“Normally, the 1st Armored Division would have finished its vacation by now, and we’d be entering training. But that prototype equipment is still being tuned, so if it wasn’t for this matter, you’d essentially be on standby for no reason. It ends up working out conveniently for us.”

The two thousand Processors who made up the Strike Package were broken up into four groups. Two of the groups were in charge of operational activity. One was in training, and the remaining group was on leave and given time to focus on their studies. Following the operation in the United Kingdom, it was Shin’s 1st Armored Division that entered their time off. That month was about to end, which would mean they would be going into their training period.

Or they should have, but since the training schedule revolved around using a new type of equipment, and since its development began only recently, that

equipment's final tests were still underway.

This was the Alliance's part of the technological exchange with its neighbors. It wasn't an entirely new invention—but a piece of equipment used by the Alliance's Feldreß, retrofitted for use by Reginleifs of the Federacy and the United Kingdom.

Even still, development had only begun over the course of this month and was already this close to completion. The Alliance's reputation as a technological giant was well deserved. But since they obviously couldn't begin training with equipment that wasn't ready yet, the training phase of their schedule had to be postponed.

With the exception of Shin and Vika, all commanders and their respective squadrons were brought to the Alliance to visit while also assisting with the training. As a favor from the Alliance, all the squadrons—not just Shin's and Vika's—were given permission to use the health resort, which was usually reserved for the Alliance army.

Thinking back to the boisterous fun he'd seen earlier, Shin shrugged. Yes, after all, this was...

"It just means our time off was extended a little. And everyone else is having fun. Myself included."

"That's good to hear... The 1st Armored Division and your six squadrons, which form the core of the unit, have seen too many horrible things—and far too often. The top brass has decided you're in need of some special care, and you had business here in the United Kingdom as it is."

The mountain of decomposed corpses they found in the Charité Underground Labyrinth. The siege road made from the mechanical corpses of Sirins and Alkonosts in the Revich Citadel Base. The discrimination and disproportionate hatred they were subjected to ever since they were children. The mental health unit had reported that the Processors urgently required some form of stress relief.

Normally, soldiers were given periods of leave to relieve stress that built up during operational activity. But in the case of the Eighty-Six, they had no hometowns or families to return to. The closest place they could call home was

the city across the river from the Strike Package's home base at Rüstkammer, where their schooling facilities were.

True, they were across the river, and they could live in the school's dormitory facilities for the duration of their leave, but the place felt like an extension of the base, and the sounds of training and blank shots could still be heard in the air.

For years, the Eighty-Six were immersed in combat. They were more used to the sounds of war than they were to peaceful silence. So if they couldn't shake off the presence of war during their leave, it wouldn't truly undo the burden on their psyches.

"I'm sure you've heard, but the other kids from the 1st Armored Division were sent to recreation facilities throughout the Federacy. Master Sergeant Bernholdt and the Nordlicht squadron turned down the offer, however, and preferred to spend time in their hometowns."

"That makes sense," Lena said.

Incidentally, the Processors who weren't here all stayed in tourist attractions and health resorts that once belonged to their legal guardians. Those past nobles still possessed some latent power over those places and used it to ensure the unit received preferential treatment.

"...Once the war ends, I'd like to take the entire unit to a resort," Grethe said. "There's one near the south sea. It wouldn't be fair otherwise. It wouldn't feel like the war ended."

The sea. Shin, who sat next to Lena, jolted at the sound of that word. Grethe didn't say it deliberately, but...

I want to show you the sea.

That vast expanse of blue Lena had never seen. Once the war ended. Together, just the two of them.

...Just the two of us?

Lena shook off that sudden thought. This was work. She was on duty. Now wasn't the time.

Incidentally, the Reginleif's mission recorder preserved everything the Processor boarding it said. And that was why Grethe, the brigade commander, actually heard what Shin said during that exchange. Lena didn't know that, though. Having made that implicit comment, Grethe eyed Shin meaningfully, but he bluntly and deliberately looked away.

The corporal who drove their vehicle held his tongue so far, as he had to focus on driving through the dark night. But now he spoke to them without taking his eyes off the road.

"Once the war ends, do come visit the Alliance again. Just for sightseeing. We have many wonderful spots that have not been overrun by those infernal contraptions. We would love for you to see them."

"Thank you, Corporal." Grethe smiled.

Their car soon pulled over. The Alliance wasn't as cold and received more sunlight than the Federacy and the United Kingdom, so it was blessed with dense forests. The woods served as natural cover and formed a thick canopy of foliage if left to grow. Beneath them was a single facility that seemed to have been built into the ground.

The place was probably designed to function as a headquarters camouflaged by the elevated land. It was heavily guarded by double layers of barbed wire and two sentries. Lena and the Eighty-Six had seen something like this in their home base in the Federacy.

This was the level of vigilance one would expect from a military facility that guarded highly confidential information. Entering and of course looking inside was incredibly restricted. It was a cage that guarded the secrets of a nation's defense.

The driver held up his ID card, which opened the gate to the base. They went down a winding road before eventually stopping in front of a building. There they had to leave the car and show their individual IDs for the metal door to open.

After closing the door, Grethe asked:

"Now, then. What do you know about the current situation?"

The two drivers weren't allowed to enter this building. They lacked the clearance to access the information inside. As such, they simply saluted them and returned to the car. This was a question Grethe wasn't allowed to ask until now.

"A joint interrogation performed by the intelligence sections of the Federacy, the United Kingdom, and the Alliance, though the Alliance wasn't part of the previous operation."

"They're considered a friendly nation, and we have no reason to exclude them from the interrogation. As compensation for taking part in it, they took over developing the new gear for us."

The Alliance of Wald developed the world's first Feldreiß in the past in order to defend its mountainous territory with its uneven terrain. Since the Alliance had very little pastures and farmlands, many people didn't have the option of working in food production. For years, those spare hands were relegated to trade, military, research, and industry, and as a result, the Alliance had a great edge when it came to its industrial forces and technological developments.

That said, they weren't quite a match for the Giadian Empire in its heyday. With their large territories and a considerable amount of harvest and tax income from their many subjects, the great noble houses of the Empire could sink all their wealth, industrial forces, and spare time into research. Each noble house competed against the others, and the Empire eventually came to possess transcendent technological prowess.

"But in this case, the Alliance's true value lies in its neutrality... The Federal Republic of Giad stands on the same land as the Empire, which created the Legion. And the United Kingdom developed the Mariana Model. When the time comes to disclose everything to the other countries, having the Alliance of Wald—a neutral nation—on our side would help improve our credibility. Even if ever so slightly."

Much like the United Kingdom's Revich Citadel Base and reserve formation encampment, this base housed its central facilities underground. They took an elevator several levels down and exited into a cold, artificial-looking corridor.

"A common interrogation between the three countries' intelligence

branches..." Vika, who'd held his tongue until now, finally parted his lips to speak. "And after a whole month of interrogation, they still have nothing?"

Lena's eyes widened in surprise. Grethe turned around and narrowed her eyes at him. He said those words as blankly as someone reciting the contents of a book from memory. To him, this was more than mere conjecture.

"Otherwise, intelligence officers could never bring themselves to ask combat personnel like Nouzen and myself for help. They have their pride to consider. They see themselves as those who fight a war of information, unlike barbarians who wield violence. Calling combat personnel to their battlefield? In most cases, their dignity would never allow it."

Grethe heaved a short sigh.

"Yes. You're right... They couldn't get anything out of it. Not even its name from when it was still alive."

One's name, rank, date of birth, and identification number: These were the details a captive soldier was required to divulge to their captors, as agreed upon in the war treaties. Assuming, of course, that said countries conformed to those treaties.

The Legion didn't take prisoners, nor did they distinguish between soldiers and civilians when they slaughtered people. They were not programmed to acknowledge peace treaties that forbade taking prisoners and killing civilians.

Even still, the intelligence branch had to pursue that basic information. It would put their name to shame if they didn't. But the Legion weren't affected by drugs or sera. They had no sense of pain, so they couldn't be tortured.

Interrogation officers had ways of squeezing information out of a prisoner even without resorting to those measures. It was said that the truly skilled could get the information they needed without so much as laying a finger on their target.

"Apparently, it's completely unresponsive to any and all communications. Speech, text... Nothing seems to get a reaction out of it."

"...I see. What a bother," Vika said.

In that case, it was clear why even the most experienced of interrogation officers would yield no results.

“Is it even possible to converse with it? Is that unit really her? Does she still retain the memories and personality she had as a human? They’re all starting to have doubts.”

“...And that’s why they called us.”

Much like on the surface, the long corridor was built in a winding manner, so as to curb the enemy’s marching speed in case of an invasion. And at the end of this corridor was a sturdy metallic door with three locks. The door opened, and upon entering, a voice with the Federacy’s accent began instructing them through the speakers. They did as they were told and entered the next room.

There, they were met with soldiers who turned to face them. Some wore the steel-gray Federacy uniforms. Others had the United Kingdom’s dark violet. And some of them had the yellow-brown uniform of the Alliance.

Among the Federacy soldiers was a young female officer with scarlet hair and bloodred eyes, who regarded Shin with a glance. She cracked a thin smile only he would notice. Shin could tell she was a special operative for the Federacy who made use of her extrasensory powers.

She likely descended from the Maika bloodline—his mother’s clan, which possessed the power of telepathy. Marquis Gelda Maika had told them that the Maika clan had branch families capable of reading the minds of people who weren’t related to them.

If even she couldn’t sense *the target’s* thoughts... It only made sense they would start doubting if the thing they were handling was at all sentient.

The room they were in was originally meant for testing weapons in developmental stages. The walls were covered in metal plates, likely as a means of preventing electromagnetic disturbance. An armored wall separated the part of the room they were in from the back, which housed a large containment cell and a cramped observation chamber right beside it.

The window was likely bulletproof and blast proof. A polarized light was set up to shine into the constraint chamber, making it so the observation chamber

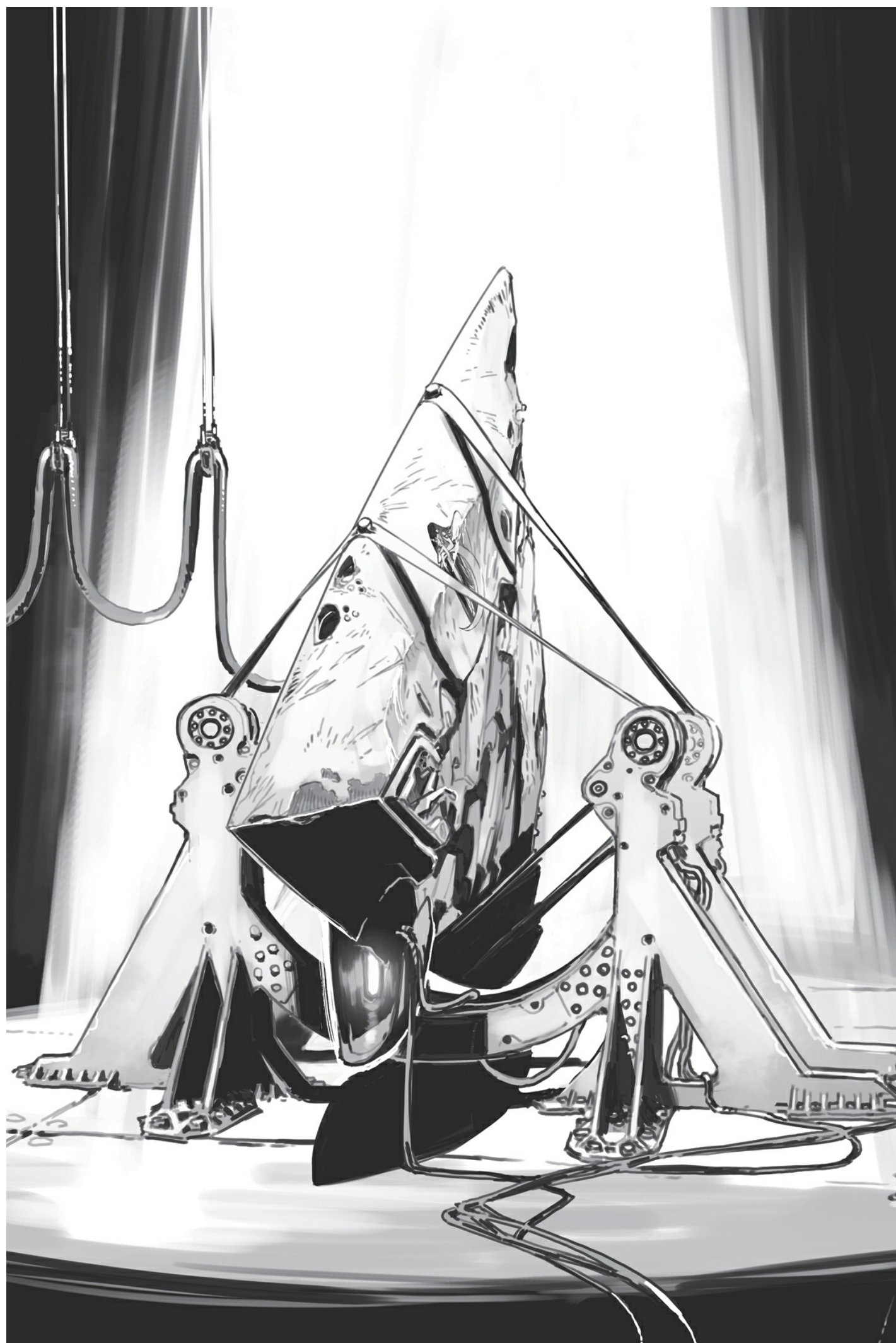
wouldn't be visible through the thick acrylic window from the inside.

And beyond that window...

Sitting with its legs removed, confined in place by multiple bolts fixing it to the floor, was a single Ameise unit.

Lunar-white armor. A golden optical sensor unique to this unit. Its armaments were missing long before it was captured, and it bore the Personal Mark of a goddess leaning against the crescent moon.

The Merciless Queen.



CHAPTER 2

MIST BLUE

“We got no response yesterday, after all.”

Breakfast was presented buffet-style, as was the case in most hotels in the Alliance. True to the cooks’ boastful claims, the food was delicious. They prepared mountains of potatoes right in front of their diners and served them with molten cheese.

Lena spoke as she brought her last bite to her lips. The sliced potatoes were made from an artificial starch substitute, but the cheese was real and delicious. Confirming the plate opposite hers had the same dish, she nodded to herself in satisfaction.

“We’ve known there’s a chance the Legion sprang traps to draw out elite units from the United Kingdom and the Federacy... That is to say, you and Vika. And if that’s the case, the victims of the attack on the United Kingdom are...”

“If nothing else, I think the voice I heard from that unit matches the archived recordings of *her* voice,” Shin replied from the opposite seat. “I think it’s too soon to jump to conclusions.”

He had two small mountains of cheese omelets and buttery scrambled eggs laid out before him. Both looked quite appetizing, but while he was attempting to decide which one to try, the chef insisted he was still a growing boy and piled a generous helping of each egg dish onto his plate.

They were in a rest house usually occupied by gluttonous officers, so the cooks were excited to feed a group of young soldiers—that is to say, growing boys and girls with appetites to match.

The cooks were quite pleased after everyone ate heartily the other day. They recommended certain types of breads, gave extra servings of piping hot soup,

and were constantly occupied with the contents of their trays.

“Besides, I think it only makes sense she didn’t respond yesterday... I did call out to her with the microphone turned off.”



They decided to start their interrogation by trying something new.

“Leave the lighting as it is for now...,” Vika said. “Nouzen, you try speaking to her with the microphone turned off.”

Standing in the dim light of the interrogation room, Shin furrowed his brows at Vika’s instructions. The fact that he offered no context as to what he was trying to do struck Shin as odd. Similar to how the constraint room didn’t allow anyone inside to see what happened outside, it also didn’t permit them to hear things from its side. If they were to speak to whatever was inside the room, one would need to turn on a designated microphone.

“What do you mean...?”

“Think back to the Dragon Fang Mountain operation. As it drew closer to its conclusion, the Merciless Queen showed herself to you... Considering she’s the commander of a base on the brink of falling to enemy hands, that course of action isn’t just illogical. It’s harmful.”

Shin had been trapped in the magma lake at the bottom of the Dragon Fang Mountain base. He had nowhere to go and was isolated in a tomb of solid rock that even cut off all his communication options.

With him was a Legion commander whose presence there was beyond abnormal, given that its base was on the verge of being taken down. That place led to nowhere in particular, and any orders it relayed from there would do nothing to help.

“It could have been a coincidence. She could have been operating on some kind of logic that’s clear to the Legion but doesn’t make sense to humans. But we can’t discredit the possibility of her intentionally showing herself to you. We must confirm that first, and if you truly are what she’s after, then we have to find out why.”

Was the Merciless Queen being captured by the Strike Package the result of

some kind of blunder on its behalf? Or did it intentionally reveal itself to them? And if it did, what was its goal? Would any nearby human nearby have served its purposes, or did it *have* to be Shin?

If Shin was the one it sought, was it because he was someone it wanted to capture, or was it because he was the one who saw the message hidden in the Phönix? Was it because he possessed royal blood? Or was it because he was the one who ultimately destroyed the Phönix?

Or was it that his voice reached the queen because he could hear the Legion's wails?

They had to discover the driving force behind the Merciless Queen's actions and, through that, try to surmise its objective.

"I can hear the Legion's voice, but I can't speak to them... I'm sure I've already told you that."

"Yes, I've heard. But since you can hear the ghosts' voices, perhaps the Reaper's voice can likewise reach the ghosts. I believe that's a natural assumption to make."



But the result of that experiment was that the Merciless Queen didn't respond after all.

"...The Legion seem to be able to hear my voice... There were a few rare cases where they were able to pinpoint my position. But there was never any actual dialogue between them and me."

"Yes. If you could speak to them, maybe you... Er. You wouldn't have had to fight your brother. But..."

Lena nodded, gently put her knife down, and pressed a finger to her lips as she remembered what happened the previous day. That white Ameise. For a split second, she thought she saw its moonlike optical sensor...

"She... I think she was looking at you. Even though she shouldn't have been able to perceive you."

Sensing his bloodred eyes on her, Lena cocked her head.

“What is it?”

“You refer to this Legion unit the way you might refer to a person, Lena. Other people call them pieces of scrap metal, but I just realized you’ve never called them any names.”

Lena blinked a few times at that statement. Now that he’d mentioned it, that was true. But the same held true for Shin.

“...Be honest. Did it bother you?” Lena asked.

Calling them scrap metal. Hearing those mechanical ghosts being referred to as something so base. Did having his brother, who was assimilated by the Legion, treated as a monster offend him?

“I wouldn’t say it bothered me, but...” Shin paused to think.

He tried to put the emotions and thoughts he didn’t quite have a handle on into some sort of order. He’d apparently decided to stop leaving things vague by saying he didn’t know. Back on the Eighty-Sixth Sector’s battlefield, he didn’t have the time nor the leisure to confront these feelings, and he couldn’t deny that part of him was running away from doing so, too.

If there was anything he didn’t want to think about or come to terms with, he’d simply ignore it. Pretend it wasn’t there. Because forcing himself to think about it or understand those things wouldn’t change anything anyway.

One day, sooner or later, he would fall on the battlefield. Such was the fate of all Eighty-Six. Or at least, so he thought... But he survived. And even after he was liberated from the shackles of fate, he still lived while being keenly aware of the looming threat of death.

He had to come to terms with it, but he continued to avoid it. And that led to the chaos that overtook him in the United Kingdom. And he didn’t want to have that happen again.

“...I think you’re right. I didn’t want them to be called by those names. Even after he became a Legion, I could only see Rei as my older brother. And Kaie and the others, they were all people I had to take along with me. I couldn’t call the Legion, who were just like them, ‘hunks of scrap metal’ or ‘mechanical ghosts.’”

Both the Legion who assimilated the war dead and the few units that were still purely mechanical ghosts didn't strike him as any different. Spirits who wandered for eternity, howling and lamenting all the while. Their cries all sounded the same to him.

"You're kind, Shin," Lena said, cracking a faint smile.

"...You've been saying that a lot lately, but do you think just telling me that is enough, Lena?" he asked with a teasing tone.

Lena pouted at him.

"I'm only saying that because those are my honest feelings... And because you never seem to realize it."

"Because I don't think it's true."

"Geez..."

It was the way he kept grinding himself to dust like this, unconsciously, without even meaning to do it, that worried her so much. Watching him wear himself out pained her heart.

"...Oh, and about the new equipment we need to check. It looks like the Merciless Queen's interrogation is going to take some time, so you can focus on the test while Raiden and the rest help..."

Shin suddenly fell silent, which made Lena chuckle.

"Shin, you look like a kid who just had his toy taken away."

Watching from a few tables away as their operations commander and tactical commander spoke like they were in a world of their own—like a pair of lovebirds—Raiden summed things up.

"...So in short, it looks like that moron finally made up his mind."

He'd told them about how Shin was lost in thought in his room the previous day. It was painfully clear by now what he'd been thinking about, of course.

"For how obvious it is, it's kind of amazing it took him this long to decide. Or, well, that he wasn't even aware of it until now," Theo remarked, resting his chin on his hand rudely as he carried a fork with a piece of greasy meat to his mouth.

“I haven’t known them that long, but even I can see it, with both of them. It’s that obvious.” Dustin nodded as he tore a piece of substitute bread.

A chef left her position behind the counter and walked between the tables with a large plate of sausages (made partially of synthesized meat), offering second servings. At her proposal, they all made space on their already full plates and accepted an extra sausage each.

Marcel bit into a fresh sausage, which had a satisfying snap to it. It was also quite hot, so he huffed and puffed a bit before chewing, then joined the conversation one gulp later.

“I’ve gotten used to seeing it by now... But I wouldn’t imagine him like this back at the special officer academy.”

“Don’t worry; we feel the same way,” said Rito, munching on a fried potato.

“Given how he was in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, forget being surprised. I never would have guessed the captain could make that kind of face...,” Yuuto said, putting aside an empty bowl of cream soup.

“What do we next, though?” Dustin asked.

“What do we do...?” Raiden let out a long, drawn-out sigh. “Well, having him blow his chances would be annoying.”

“For sure.” Theo nodded.

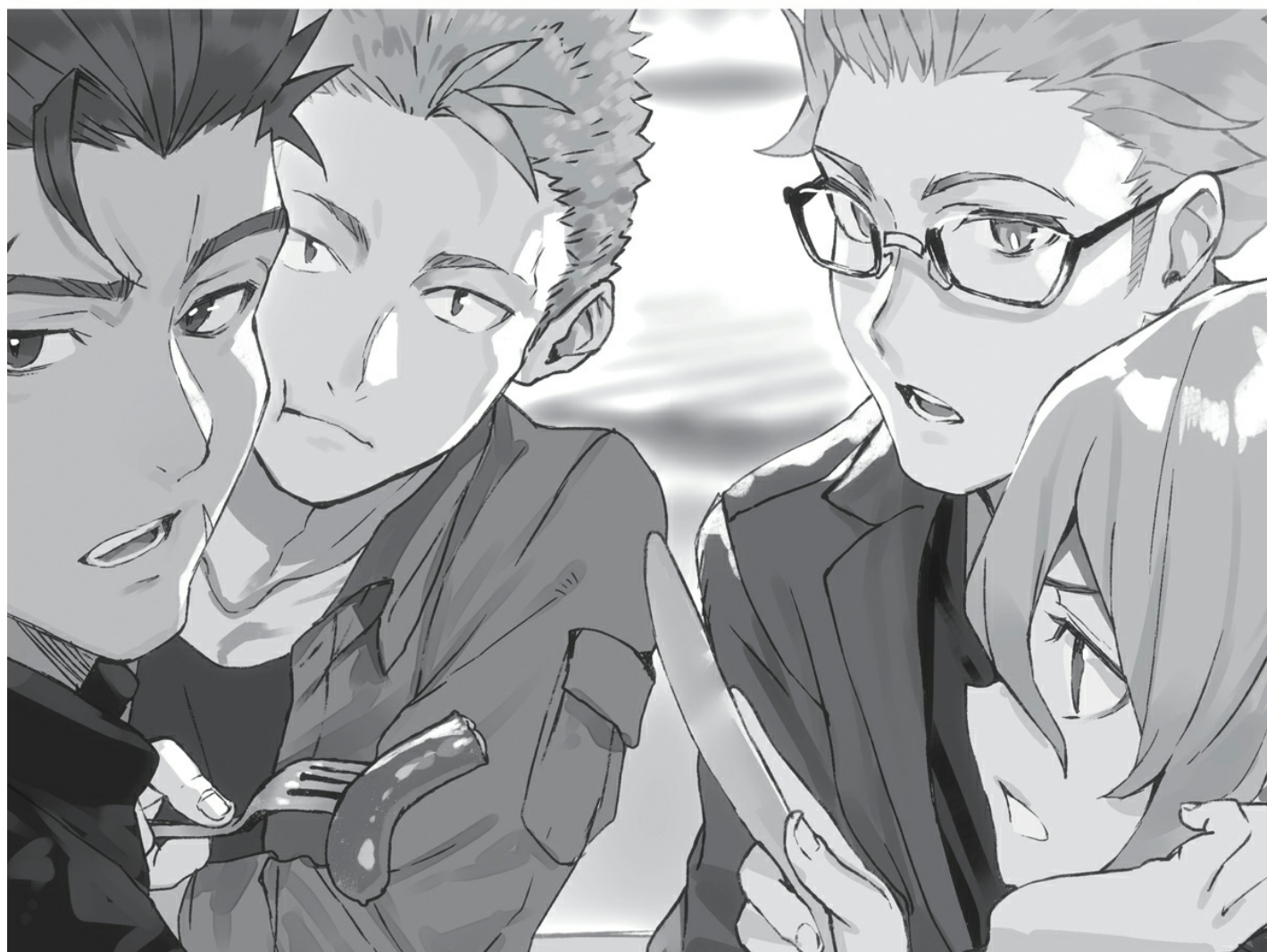
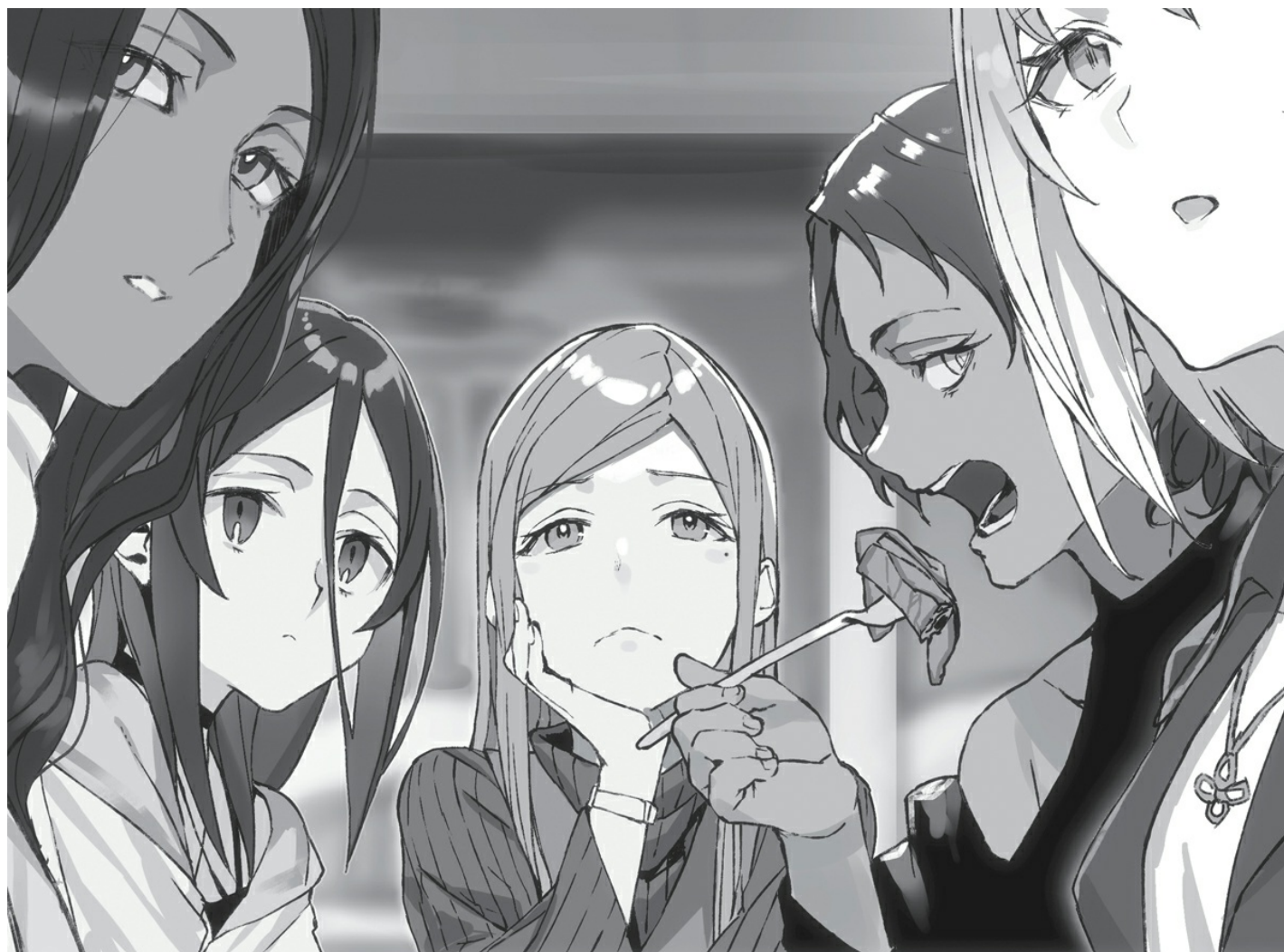
“Honestly, this is starting to annoy me,” Yuuto added.

All four sighed in unison.

“Guess we’ll have to back him up.”

The same exchange was taking place from Lena’s side. Anju, Shiden, Annette, Michihi, and Shana were whispering among one another, their table as loaded with dishes as all the rest.

There were two others who had no desire to take part in this conversation. Kurena was reverently cutting into three layers of pancakes topped with berry compote while Frederica was stuffing her cheeks with honeyed toast, their expressions rather mixed and unsatisfied with the whole affair. The other girls felt bad for them but decided to leave them be for now.



“I think the problem is that Lena isn’t aware of it yet,” said Anju as she plopped a slice of roasted apple into her mouth.

“If y’ask me, the fact that Her Majesty still hasn’t noticed is almost impressive,” Shiden said, skewering a still-sizzling piece of bacon with her fork.

“Especially because Shin’s, well... He’s pretty transparent, too...” Annette sighed as she crunched on a spoonful of cereal served with dried fruit.

“So,” said Michihi, who sat next to Annette, cocking her head. “What do we do?”

Shana frowned as the strawberry she bit into turned out to be sourer than she thought and smeared jam over a baguette to soothe her palate.

“I’d say we just support them, but Lena not making up her mind on how she feels is a problem,” she said.

“Yeah... But having her run away now would just leave me with a bad taste in my mouth.”

“I’ll be honest: Their back-and-forth is starting to get pretty annoying.”

Everyone present, with the exception of Kurena and Frederica, sighed in unison.

“We should keep an eye on Lena so she doesn’t run away this time.”

“—My word. All this insistence on romance and desire... Commoners lead such carefree lives.”

Vika uttered this fed up comment as he watched over both the pair of Shin and Lena and the Eighty-Six cheering them on from the sidelines. He disliked crowded places, so he had his breakfast in his room and came to the cafeteria only to get some coffee afterward.

At first, it seemed like he was gracefully enjoying the sight, but his words lacked elegance and made clear his distaste for it all.

His succession rights were revoked. He was feared as the coldhearted Serpent of Shackles and Decay who toyed with the departed. But even still, Vika was royalty. And more importantly, he was the Amethystus—the heir to the

Idinarohk extrasensory ability. Regardless of whether he intended to pass on his blood to the next generation, he was forbidden from mingling with those of a different color.

For as long as he could remember, and before he was even born, his legal wife and several concubine candidates were already decided for him. And that didn't just apply to him but for all members of the Idinarohk bloodline.

For the bloodline of the unicorns, something as selfish as one's romantic feelings held no weight when it came to selecting a spouse. To begin with, romance wasn't a trait that humanity possessed since antiquity. It was a contemporary concept, borne of modernity, and the United Kingdom valued the old ways.

And so this bittersweet image of cherubic youth unfolding before his eyes only struck him as dull and irritating... He wasn't the slightest bit envious of them.

On the seat opposite him was Lerche. Her hands were cupped around a mug of coffee she'd received. She couldn't drink it, of course, and only took it out of courtesy. Gazing at him, she parted her lips.

"Your Highness, should you not, um, finalize your marriage with your fiancée, Princess Yaroslava...?"

"Shut up, you seven-year-old."

"But!" Lerche leaned forward, her hands still grasping the mug. "The fact that you've put off the wedding rites for so long torments the princess, Your Highness. She has even come to me, a mere mechanical doll, for advice! She asked me if you find her useless or lacking in any way. She shed bitter tears, like morning dew dripping from an immature rose... I cannot bear to see it, Your Highness."

"....."

Vika fell silent. He knew. His irritation at this unwanted admonishment and a hint of regret left him speechless.

That girl had been chosen for no reason other than that she possessed the blood of a powerful family within the United Kingdom, a branch of the bloodline

of unicorns. She was raised into a wife who would not bring shame to the prince she hoped to marry. Nurtured to be a meek, obedient spouse who would not interfere in matters of government. Bred to be a healthy woman who could brave the challenges of childbirth.

A seedbed to cultivate the next generation of the Idinarohk bloodline.

She was not a disagreeable young woman. Quite the contrary. She never uttered a single word of complaint to Vika and was well dispositioned and kind to an almost foolish degree. So much so that she didn't even find fault with Lerche, who was not only far below her in the pecking order but wasn't even human.

But even so...

"...Shut up."

To have *her*, of all people, tell him to choose another. To have a girl who was identical to Lerchenlied say those words to him...was still too much to bear.

As he watched over the boys' and girls' tranquil breakfast, Sergeant Guren Akino of the Strike Package's 27th Maintenance Company—the company charged with Reginleif maintenance—heaved a sigh.

Honestly...

The maintenance crew aside, this was supposed to be a fun vacation for the brats.

"How am I supposed to break the news...? *Sorry to drop this on ya, but it's time to get to work, Processors?*"



<<Commence operation.>>

<<System start, WHM XM2 Reginleif.>>

<<Mk. 1 Armée Furieuse, activate. System check.>>

<<Leg harness, coupling confirmed. Complete.>>

<<Mantle of Frīja, operating normally. Link start.>>

<<Main circuit confirmed—operating normally.>>

<<Secondary circuit confirmed—operating normally.>>

Closing the sub-window was meant to communicate that the additional armament had activated properly. Shin let out a single, sharp breath. He was seated in his dark, cramped cockpit, with the optical screen before his eyes being the only source of light.

The order to sortie had been given. Letters flickered on the additional armament's holo-window, forming words.

<<Trajectory, clear.>>

<<Mantle of Frīja, deploying.>>



“The Valkyries take flight.”

The Operator smiled faintly as they watched the machine move, graced with fresh mobility by the new armament dubbed the Mantle of Frīja. That cold, ferocious form of the Federal Republic of Giad's Feldreß, crafted in the color of polished bone, exhibited performance suited to its namesake—Reginleif, the Valkyrie that heralds death.

But even so, they would overcome them. For this flock of griffins, this battlefield of mountain and stone was their turf, and they would not be beaten here.

“Now, then.” The Operator smiled, their faint lips curling up with glee. “Let us be off, comrades. Sprint down our fortress with the nimbleness of a mountain goat and the ferocity of a swooping eagle!”



<<Operation: Phase One, complete.>>

<<Commencing Phase Two. Mantle of Frīja, disconnect.>>

After that message, the sub-window flickered out. An explosive bolt triggered, jettisoning the armament that wasn't visible from within the cockpit.

And in the next moment, a shock jolted him.

“...!”

An impact that was far stronger than Shin had expected—stronger than his unit had ever experienced in a single instant—sent Undertaker reeling. As Shin

gritted his teeth over the vibrations that almost made him bite his tongue, a question filled his mind.

Phase Two?

Just then, a couple of blips representing two of his unit's Juggernauts went dark on his status screen. They belonged to...

"Shana?!"

"Are those hostiles?!"

Shin scanned the forest around them with Undertaker's optical sensor, but there was no sign of any enemy units. However, his consort units' radars and optical sensors did perceive an enemy unit's presence, transmitting it to Undertaker's radar through the data link.

It was unregistered in the database. An unidentified unit.

An enemy unit... No, an enemy force.

This operation was a simple patrol, set to end as soon as they entered enemy territory. According to their premission briefing, no enemy forces had been deployed nearby, and no engagements were predicted.

Shin racked his brain, then shook his head. The situation on the battlefield was dynamic, ever in flux. Especially on such misty terrain, where the thick fog obfuscated enemy movements.

At the edge of his vision, he saw a shadow settle between the woods. The moment he noticed it, that shadow shifted its bearings and took cover between the trees, but Undertaker fired a shot after it.

Converting its velocity of 1,600 meters per second into piercing force, a tungsten spear 30 meters in diameter blasted into the trees the enemy took cover behind, crushing whatever was hiding behind it with a cold rumble. The impact of the warhead was dampened by the trees, but it still resonated with all who witnessed it.

The enemy's armor likely wasn't thick. It was probably similar to the Juggernaut's and the Reginleif's.

But on the other hand, the blips of Shin's consort units were going out one

after another. Over ten had already lost their signal. He squinted as, to his surprise, even Shiden's Cyclops went out. This may have been an ambush, but the enemy's force must have been considerable to have done this much damage.

"—All units."

He *couldn't hear these enemies' howls*. So he spoke as he kept a careful eye on the optical screen.

"The enemy moves at high speeds, but their armor is thin. Don't worry about their cover and shoot. Don't count on my scouting, either. Maintain your formation and continue the search—"

A shadow crossed Undertaker's feet. It wasn't in the shape of a headless prowling spider like the Juggernauts. It was that of a large quadrupedal animal—a different sort of unit.

"...!"

A moment after Undertaker hopped away, a tremor ran through the ground. A spear of metal that looked like a steel stake stabbed into the spot Undertaker had occupied less than a second ago, sending up a spray of dirt as if the area had been stomped on by a giant.

A high-frequency lance.

Similar to the Reginleif's pile drivers, it was equipped with a detonation mechanism that would drive it into the enemy at close range using explosives.

"—Ooh!" A voice filled Undertaker's cockpit.

Shin narrowed his eyes. The voice belonged to the person in the enemy unit. The Operator spoke with their external speaker on, intentionally so Shin would hear them. It was a beautiful voice, an alto like the ringing of a musical instrument.

The enemy unit landed, its form dark brown like a wolf's. The database still displayed it as an unidentified unit. Its exterior was reminiscent of a griffin. On its right shoulder sat a high-frequency lance, glinting like a beast's fang. Its launching rail reeled back, and the lance returned to its percussion point with a

heavy metallic thud.

It had likely hopped down the cliffs behind the trees. This was a maneuver the Reginleif couldn't imitate. The Reginleif was a unit that prioritized high mobility, but it was designed for combat on flat terrain, forests, and urban areas. This unit, on the other hand, prided itself on vertical mobility.

Its two optical sensors—like an animal's eyes—glinted mockingly at Undertaker.

"Ooh, you even dodged an attack launched at *that* timing! I'd heard you can only hear the Legion's voices, though!"

Shin narrowed his eyes. Unlike his allies, who hardly knew anything about their opponents, the enemy was well-informed, it seemed. But that didn't mean much.

"...Did you think that, just because I can't hear you, I wouldn't be able to read your patterns?"

As instructed during his briefing, Shin shut off his radio communications and remained connected to the other Processors only through the Para-RAID. As such, what he'd just said didn't reach the enemy's ears. This wasn't a response; he'd only muttered to himself.

"Don't underestimate me."

The Eighty-Six watched the battle unfold in blank amazement. Within the green forested battlefield displayed on their optical screens, two armored weapons were engaged in an almost even battle.

Yes, they were equally matched.

And that was what rendered the Eighty-Six speechless. They were all Name Bearers, but Shin stood head and shoulders above them all. By now, their Reaper was capable of single-handedly overwhelming a Dinosauria.

And someone was matching *him*. In melee combat, his area of expertise, no less. It was the first time they'd ever seen such a thing.

And the same held true for the ones aboard the enemy units. They couldn't believe there was someone capable of matching their heroic princess, Anna

Maria, and her spear dance.

Similar to the Reginleif, the enemy's unit's design concept was based around high-mobility combat. It fought with an agility that matched the Reginleif, which boasted combat speeds that would injure any inexperienced Operator.

The Phönix was faster, Shin thought through his sober consciousness.

He was operating a Reginleif now, but for most of his seven years of combat experience, Shin piloted a Juggernaut. A slow, clunky unit with performance so pitiful, the Eighty-Six mockingly dubbed it a walking coffin. And Shin was used to engaging the absurdly agile Legion in that weak, sluggish rig.

So now that he used a unit with performance that matched his opponent's, he wouldn't be caught off guard.

The moment the high-frequency lance was fired at him, Shin charged forward from a squatting position, resulting in the weapon only piercing empty air. As it intersected with the enemy unit, Undertaker swung its high-frequency blade, cutting the firing rail down the middle. Without pausing, he changed the blade's bearing and slashed at the enemy unit's torso.

The griffin dodged by jumping away, only for Shin to pursue it and close the gap. The griffin kicked off the ground again, shooting a wire anchor and reeling it back to supplement its speed.

The Juggernaut's long-caliber 88 mm turret was well within firing range, and the pile drivers in its legs meant that just being stepped on by it was a powerful attack. And when Feldreß landed, they needed a moment for their buffering systems and their joints to absorb the impact. As such, despite seeing Undertaker's charge, the griffin shouldn't have been able to move at once.

It shouldn't have been able to move.

The griffin sneered at Undertaker fiercely. As it jumped away, it lifted one of its hind legs, which was caught on a tight, extended wire before any of the other legs landed. This made it rotate in place, with that leg as its axis. The wire reached Undertaker and coiled itself around its legs.

“...?!”

Undertaker was pulled forward, losing its balance. The other unit had its acceleration curbed by pulling Undertaker in, and the two units collided slightly earlier than expected. Sooner than Shin could react, the enemy stomped down on the blunt back of his high-frequency blade, halting its swing.

But still, Undertaker's two front legs caught against the enemy's curved cockpit block, their tips just barely touching the armor.

Armament selection, switch. Trigger.

The pile drivers in Undertaker's two front legs accurately pierced into the enemy's cockpit block. And as they did, the enemy's short-barreled turret, which was pressed against Undertaker's white armor, howled.



<<Operation complete.>>



<<Personal unit, seriously damaged.>>

<<Surviving consort units: 5.>>

<<Remaining enemy units: 0.>>

Watching as the final score was displayed before him, Shin opened the simulator's canopy. It didn't list the result of that last enemy he fought, but it probably ended in a mutual kill. Or rather, he was driven to bring their clash to a mutual kill... Or perhaps drove the enemy to it.

Either way, he left the simulator designed after a Reginleif's cockpit and leaned against its streamlined chassis, letting out a deep breath. This was a simulator for the Armée Furieuse—the newly completed armament designed for the Reginleif. Putting aside Phase Two—the mock battle they were thrust into—Shin thought.

It's gonna be hell until I get used to this...

He wasn't accustomed to such intense acceleration. It made him feel like all the blood and organs in his body were being siphoned out, and it was the first time he was exposed to this sort of sensation for such a long time. His five senses were so thrown out of balance that he couldn't even tell which direction he was facing.

In the virtual training room adjacent to the simulator, a capsule Shin thought was empty opened its canopy, and another Operator rose from within it. Perhaps in the name of increasing their units' operability, the Alliance's Feldreß had control systems that were augmented by being directly linked to the Operator's nervous systems.

The cords connected along the Operator's spinal column and all the way up to their neck were unplugged, their serpentine edges twisting like snakes as they fell limply into the cockpit's interior. As if following suit, the Operator undid their hair, letting their long black locks flow down to their waist.

"...I've heard you were skilled, but..."

"The queen is as silent as ever, but it seems bringing him to meet it did have some effect."

They looked down at the virtual training room through the glass walls of the meeting room above it. The elderly woman standing next to Grethe spoke. Her long hair was dyed red, and she had the blue eyes of a Sapphira. Her stance was stalwart, as if she were made of steel down to her very core.

Lieutenant General Bel Aegis. Supreme commander of the Alliance military's northern defensive forces. She was the woman who had attended the Morpho subjugation council as the Alliance's representative.

"The footage from yesterday's interrogation has been analyzed, and the results show that it moved slightly after Captain Nouzen called out to it. Maybe we can see it as it reacting to him."

Ever since the Alliance was formed, it practiced universal conscription. It had never based its army strictly on men, and as such, there was relatively little difference between the mannerisms of men and women in the Alliance. Soldiers, in particular, chose to use brief, concise wording, so as to not overcomplicate delivery of orders. And so it was hard to tell a male soldier from a female soldier just by the way they spoke.

"...He's a valuable target for the Legion. That might have been why it reacted."

"I'm not telling you to order him to stand right in front of it."

“And I don’t plan on ordering him to do that... But if he volunteers, I see no reason to stop him.”

For a moment, a thread of tension—so strained that it could break with a single touch—hung between the two female officers.

“Lieutenant General Aegis... Regarding *that* matter... I find it problematic. She is my subordinate, so I ask that you inform me before any meetings are arranged.”

“*They* only came to the Alliance because you Federacy officers insist on saying that... The Alliance is a neutral nation. We don’t support any one side.”

The sole exception was when it came to fighting the Legion, a common enemy to all humanity. But that wasn’t to say they didn’t have their own opinions. Looking down at the Eighty-Six, Lieutenant General Aegis spoke without even looking at Grethe. Her expression was like that of a strict grandmother looking down at her grandchildren playing in the yard.

“Colonel, I’m merely speaking to myself right now, but... A few days ago, you confirmed the survival of some small countries to the west of the Republic, yes?”

The Federacy’s aid expeditionary force was still stationed in the Republic, fighting to retake its northern regions. The United Kingdom’s was likewise stationed in the Republic’s west. Both of them successfully communicated with those countries and were maintaining a steady exchange of information.

“That country truly is vile. But should we treat them too coldly, they might yield to that mad country in the far west.”

...So that’s your angle.

“We’re grateful for your sympathy, Lieutenant General Aegis.”

A person approached, their military boots clicking against the floor. As they walked, they smoothly undid their hair ribbon with a practiced motion, letting their hair flow down their back like a dark waterfall.

“I didn’t imagine the most I could do was bring this battle to a mutual kill... You’re quite something.”

Their fair, alto-like voice had something of an echo to it, perhaps because of the material the walls were made out of. A clear, charming voice that was accustomed to giving orders. The scent of June roses wafted up from their autumn-colored Alliance uniform, which matched their androgynous face. It bore a striking resemblance to Anna Maria, the heroic princess of the Alliance's independence war, who took to the battlefield clad in male clothing.

Shin knew the face. When they were briefed on the simulator, this person joined as part of the personnel dispatched to the Strike Package, so he had seen them before. If he remembered correctly, their name was...

"Allow me to reintroduce myself. I'm Captain Olivia Aegis, your academic adviser with regards to operating the Armée Furieuse... That was a magnificent match just now."

"I've heard of you, Captain Aegis. I'm Captain Shinei Nouzen of the Strike Package's 1st Armored Division."

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance... Oh, and you can call me Olivia. No need for formalities. I might be older than you, but we're both the same rank," Captain Olivia said with a slight head tilt. "Or maybe you're actually more experienced than I am? I hear the Eighty-Six were drafted at young ages, and you're treated as a captain since you're their leader. If I may, how old were you...?"

"True, ranks didn't mean anything in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. Truthfully, I'm not sure if it actually counts as part of my active duty."

"You don't have to be so stiff... So how old were you?"

"...I was twelve. It's been about six years since I was drafted."

"I see... That was rude of me, Captain Nouzen, sir."

Olivia saluted in a jesting manner. Looking up at them, Shin cracked a wry smile. Even he could tell Olivia was trying to break the ice.

"I'll admit, when they told us we'd be going into simulator training to experience the Mantle's mobility, I didn't expect it to turn into a mock battle," Shin said.

“Oh? Didn’t they explain it during briefing? In real combat, you’ll likely always have engagements with the Legion after deploying the Mantle. So during this simulation, my Anna Maria and our Alliance’s Stollenwurm assumed the roles of your aggressors.”

“No, we’ve heard nothing of the sort.”

“My... What a blunder on my behalf. It seems I neglected to inform you of that part.”

Olivia turned their eyes slightly, their tone and expression making it clear it was a blatant lie. They were planning to launch a surprise attack to begin with.

“That final maneuver Anna Maria pulled. You couldn’t have done that if you weren’t perfectly confident that you knew what I’d do. Could you reveal your trick?”

The way Anna Maria used its wire anchors while landing to entangle Undertaker and close the distance. Adrenaline was said to sometimes give one the impression that time was moving slowly, but this was a judgment call that was put into action within less than a second. It was as if Olivia predicted everything before shooting the anchor.



“I’m sorry, but that’s classified information. I could expose it to you, but it would only be when and if you become my opponent. When you lose to me and die in battle.”

“...”

“I’m joking... It’s the same reason as you. I’m what they call an Esper.”

Olivia’s blue eyes regarded him with an amused gaze. A uniquely deep shade—a Sapphira’s blue. They were a noble bloodline trait of the Adularia. In other words, a bloodline that had a supernatural ability running in its veins for generations. It was possible that Olivia’s ink-black hair denoted some Jet blood as well.

“My father’s clan was once a warrior clan in the Rinka region. They had the power of future sight. Over time, the bloodline mixed and thinned. I can only see three seconds into the future.”

“And that’s how...”

Olivia’s Stollenwurm, Anna Maria, was a model modified and optimized for melee combat. *A fighting style that wasn’t common in present warfare*, Shin thought, somewhat blind to his own shortcomings.

But three seconds in the middle of combat granted a huge advantage. Especially in close-range melee combat, being able to see three seconds ahead could make all the difference.

As Shin was beginning to consider what he’d do if he had to face this opponent in combat again, Olivia smiled, as if seeing through him.

“Your face tells me that you’re considering how to beat me next time, Captain. At a glance, you appear stoic and collected, but you’re surprisingly competitive, aren’t you?”

“...Being on the losing side doesn’t sit well with me.”

He didn’t harbor any childish illusions of being stronger than anyone else, but...ever since he achieved the position of captain, he’d never relinquished it to anyone.

“I don’t believe our little sparring match ended in a loss for either side. It was

a mutual kill... But maybe that stubbornness is what made you develop that much skill and achieve all that you have. I hear that, in the end, you single-handedly felled that new Legion unit, the Phönix.”

Shin looked at Olivia sharply, and the Alliance’s captain simply shrugged.

“The Alliance gathers information on all the other countries,” Olivia said with a smile, and yet there was a hint of annoyance to those words.

It was as if they were restraining a deep-seated rage.

“We’re finally beginning to return the debt with the development of the Armée Furieuse, but until now, we’ve been one-sidedly receiving information and technology from the Federacy and the United Kingdom. And though we’re grateful, we’re also honestly a bit irritated by this... There is no honor in receiving handouts.”

“Goodness gracious, my apologies for intruding while you’re on leave, Colonel Milizé. And thank you for making time despite my sudden request for a meeting.”

“...Don’t mention it.”

They were in the bathhouse’s lounge, which was located away from the main building of the resort. The place was furnished in a florid style reminiscent of ancient architecture. With a table colored in Tyrian purple made from synthetic dye between them, Lena exchanged pleasantries with her not-at-all welcome guest.

A guest wearing the same Prussian-blue uniform she wore. The Republic’s uniform.

“I’ve heard of your many feats, Colonel. How you helped liberate Republic territories occupied by those metal monsters—and the aid you’ve extended to the Federacy. Wonderful, splendid. You are indeed the warrior goddess our Republic takes pride in. The second coming of the Saint Magnolia.”

“Those were all thanks to the power of the Federacy and their Strike Package—and the aid from the United Kingdom. And most importantly of all, the credit goes to the Strike Package’s Processors. This isn’t about me, Lieutenant Colonel.”

“What are you saying? Everyone in the motherland, myself included, knows the truth of it.”

This middle-aged man with the rank insignia of lieutenant colonel bowed his corpulent form at Lena, who was young enough to pass as his daughter. Apparently, he was a teacher before the Legion War. His round face was fixed in an amicable, sincere smile meant to calm children.

“The Patriotic Knights were right, after all. So long as they are properly managed by the Republic’s capable officers, even the inferior Eighty-Six can become a viable method for opposing the Legion.”

Lena’s expression contorted slightly. *Again. They’re doing it again.* The words kept coming out—words that crushed Lena under the weight of disgust and loathing. Not toward herself but toward others.

“You are the *very personification* of it, Colonel Vladilena Milizé. The fact *that this unit of Eighty-Six* is making unparalleled strides in the Legion War under *your* command is irrefutable evidence of this.”

“...!”

The words impacted her like a blow to the head. This was the ideology of the Patriotic Knights—or the Bleachers, as the Eighty-Six mockingly called that faction. The Republic’s Alba were the superior race, and San Magnolia would not lose so long as they were allowed dominion over the inferior Eighty-Six.

It filled her with shame and disgust. But the truly horrible part was that she... *Lena, of all people...* was being propped up as proof of this unrealistic, bigoted nonsense...

“Ugh...”

The shock and outrage of it all made her jaw stiffen, but she somehow managed to speak.

“I will say this as many times as I need to. The Eighty-Sixth Strike Package is a unit that belongs to the Federacy’s military. The child soldiers you call Eighty-Six are citizens of the Federacy and soldiers enlisted in the Federacy military. Me being a Republic soldier doesn’t mean—”

“Thousands die to make one hero, as they say, Colonel Milizé. Merit goes not to the soldiers but to their commander. The Strike Package has distinguished itself under your command, and so its achievements are naturally yours—and by extension, the Republic’s. We cannot let the Federacy continue to take everything from us. The credit...and the Eighty-Six...will be with us again before long.”

“The Federacy offered the Eighty-Six asylum from the Republic’s persecution!”

“The word *asylum* has a pleasant ring to it, but it does not justify appropriating another country’s property! They can call us inhumane for treating pigs like pigs. But does that mean they can freely take what is rightfully ours?! What an absurd notion!!”

“The Eighty-Six... They’re not livestock, and they’re not property. They’re human beings! You can’t—”

Slamming his hand against the desk, he silenced Lena. The lieutenant colonel leaned forward, fixing his glacial stare on her. Desperately.

“...Please do away with this libel. Everything you’ve just said is propaganda, drummed up by the Federacy to humiliate us. These are not things that ought to leave the lips of a Republic citizen such as yourself.”

“ ...”

I...I am...

“Please, Colonel. We ask for your cooperation. I do not wish to send my students onto the battlefield. I don’t want to see any of them die.”

Even at the cost of sending the Eighty-Six to their deaths. Again.

Aaah... Lena realized, sorrow filling her heart.

Even now, after all this time, after everything that had happened, the Republic’s citizens did not acknowledge the Eighty-Six’s basic human rights. And she finally realized why they were siding with the Bleachers.

It was because if they didn’t get the Eighty-Six back, *they* would have to be the ones to take to the battlefield.

The system of the Eighty-Sixth Sector was meant to safeguard the Republic's peace and public order, and they wanted to see it restored. Because if they didn't, this time it would be them who had to step onto a battlefield of certain death to oppose the Legion.

And they've been using me...me of all people...as proof that this terrible, morally bankrupt system works...?

Lena sank into the sofa, speechless. Despondence, disappointment, and a sense of vertigo overcame her all at once.

It's all because of me. I'm so...shallow. Because of me, those proud warriors are being called pigs in human form again.

"Colonel, you're a citizen of the Republic, too. Do you not love your homeland? You can't possibly suggest we send our innocent children onto the battlefield!"

The sound of military boots squeaking against the floor disrupted their argument as someone advanced on the lieutenant colonel, close enough to the point where it bordered on impolite.

"I might not have a homeland, but even I can understand that people feel loyalty to their country. Even if I don't feel that way myself."

Lena stiffened at the sound of that voice. She didn't think it'd be him. Normally, his footsteps were silent, and she thought he was out in the nearby base.

"But I do think that sending other people to die for your country and calling it patriotism is too big of a leap in logic."

It was Shin, with his usual collected tone and serene gaze.

"Shi... *Captain*. Er, I thought you were out training..."

"We completed our exercise... And when I came back, our Mascot told us you had a strange guest. So I thought I'd introduce myself."

Rather than feel relieved, Lena was so ashamed, she wished the ground would open up and swallow her. How much had Shin heard? Did he hear why the man before her, clad in the same uniform as her, was continuing to mock

and disparage the Eighty-Six?

And if he did hear all that, how was he feeling now?

The lieutenant colonel, by contrast, looked at Shin in puzzlement. He had the expression of a man who had just been barked at by what he thought was an obedient dog.

“Are you one of the Eighty-Six the Colonel is *herding*? Seeing you dressed like a human is misleading... This is a conversation between *people*. Know your place and leave.”

“Yes, it’s as you said. I’m an Eighty-Six. But... No, *because* I’m an Eighty-Six...”

Shin spoke composedly. There was no anger in his words. He spoke as if he was simply stating the obvious.

“...there’s no reason I should stand by and let you mock me, Republic citizen. Not you nor anyone else.”

Lena looked at Shin in awe. This was something he had never said before. Up until now, he had simply disregarded all the scorn directed toward him, acting as if he wasn’t bothered by any of it. He would say there was no point in taking offense or responding to anything the white pigs said. Because no matter what he might say, they wouldn’t understand. Because no amount of explaining would make them understand they were wrong.

Those ignorant pigs may have pretended to be capable of language, but the truth was that they didn’t understand anything they were told. And to an extent, Shin still believed this. But despite that, he wouldn’t put up with these insults any longer. His calm voice and tranquil eyes grimly communicated this.

“Know your—”

“I’m well aware of my place, and that’s why I’m talking to you. I’m not livestock, and I’m not a drone component, either... Same as how you people aren’t some superior species. You’re just the ignorant citizens of a republic that died in the large-scale offensive.”

The lieutenant colonel walked off, spouting vitriol and swearing he’d issue a complaint to the Federacy for this insult. Shin simply watched him walk off, his

eyes utterly apathetic to it all.

“Complaining about a ‘filthy *stain*’ to a Federacy made up of people representing all hues. Does that man think before he opens his mouth?”

“...Shin, I’m sorry,” Lena said, hanging her head.

“No need to apologize. I’ve told you before: The words of people like him don’t get to me.”

“...”

Lena’s hands, which rested on her waist, firmly grabbed the hem of the skirt of her Prussian-blue Republic uniform. In this moment, the fact that it was a different color from Shin’s was especially hard to ignore.

“Still... I’m sorry.”

“...I won’t stop you if you want to apologize that much, and if you insist you’re no different from the rest of the Republic, I won’t argue... But...”

Lena looked up, only for her gaze to meet his bloodred eyes. Her crestfallen form was reflected in them, and there was a tinge of sadness and concern in his eyes. They were earnest.

“You might be a woman of the Republic, but at the same time, you’re the queen of the Eighty-Six. Please don’t deny that. Not now.”

“My, Shinei... You truly are becoming the image of dauntless masculinity, aren’t you?”

“Don’t you think that’s rude? I’d stop if I were you.”

Sitting atop a lion-legged sofa was Frederica, nodding sagely as her crimson eyes glimmered. Next to her, Vika cut into her words, utterly exasperated. The monitor of the mobile terminal in his hands detected his eyes had moved away from it and automatically turned off the hologram it was projecting.

“I can understand being concerned for Nouzen, especially given what happened in the United Kingdom. But isn’t it about time you stop clinging to your brother so much?”

“I am merely watching over him!” Frederica retorted grumpily.

Vika looked at her with slight irritation. He was surprised that Shin could put up with this cheeky Mascot's whims. They may have had the same bloodred eyes and black hair, but they weren't actually siblings.

...And that made Vika wonder. What circumstances brought this girl to the Strike Package in the first place? Vika knew the Imperial army once employed Mascots as well and assumed this girl was the result of some high-ranking noble's unbridled lust. But why send her to *this* unit?

"Well, I suppose eavesdropping any longer would indeed be boorish of me...", Frederica said, sullenly closing her eyes. "What of Shion and the others? Did our Strike Package emerge safe and victorious?"

First Lieutenant Siri Shion of the 2nd Armored Division was currently filling in for Shin as operations commander of the Strike Package. Under their command, the Strike Package's 2nd and 3rd Armored Divisions were dispatched to the northern coast's basin countries. Vika had been watching the reports of their fighting on his information terminal's news program until now.

"Eighty percent of their initial objective is complete, by the looks of it. They had to break through enemy lines again, but... Well, given how much of a show the news is making of it, I don't think there were many losses."

"...?"

"At least as far as the public is concerned, the Strike Package is the Federacy's trump card for opposing the threat of the Legion. And seeing as the end of the war isn't even on the horizon, the people would never be allowed to hear anything about them struggling, to say nothing of losing. The Federacy would never be able to maintain morale if they let that kind of news come out."

Frederica furrowed her brows, picking up on Vika's implications. A unit that couldn't afford to lose—to fail in its duty. In other words...

"...They must continue being a company of heroes, you say..."

"The Eighty-Six have multiple factors that make it easy to prop them up as heroes."

A history that drew on one's attention and the strength of the elite. And... tragedy. Even the savior's name itself would not have gone down in history had

he not been sentenced to crucifixion.

“And what of your unit? Are they doing well?” Frederica asked.

“The news didn’t report on them, but they’re probably fine. Despite appearances, that woman’s reliable when it comes to completing her objectives... If only she was that capable *off* the battlefield.”

“Zashya, was it? I can certainly understand your concerns regarding that one.”

Zashya was a major of the United Kingdom military who was dispatched to the Strike Package alongside Vika and served as his deputy in running the regiment. With Vika in the Alliance, she took over command in his place.

She was a petite girl with large, unfashionable glasses. She would trip over herself whenever walking down the corridor and often drop all the documents she was carrying. A timid, unreliable girl who always broke into tears when Vika chewed her out for her blunders.

Incidentally, *Zashya* wasn’t her actual name but a nickname he gave her. It meant *little rabbit girl*, but the Eighty-Six assumed it was her actual name, and so the name *Major Zashya* remained, even after that misunderstanding was corrected.

“Still, she did graduate from the special officer academy at the top of her class, one way or another. Practical courses included... But that aside...”

“...What?” Frederica asked, shuddering at the image of that girl going through officer’s training.

Vika ignored her and carried on.

“Worrying over her work after I’d entrusted her with my duties is bad manners for a ruler. I trust her to handle things, one way or other.”

Frederica fell silent for a moment. *Bad manners for a ruler. For a king.*

“But I thought you did not intend to inherit the throne.”

Frederica was an empress without any territory or subjects. But even so, she intended to act as a ruler would. Until now, she’d fulfilled none of the duties of an empress—and that filled her with regret. A regret she shared with no one.

“And despite insisting that you won’t be king, you still act as a royal would?”

Vika cocked his head, puzzled. Why would a girl who wasn’t royalty herself ask him that question?

“I do. Because I believe that’s how I ought to act.”



Despite being the busiest of them all, even Shin’s schedule was surprisingly open. Halfway through breakfast, he suddenly remembered he had free time that day and proposed to Lena that the two of them head into town.

“Assuming you’re free, that is. As a change of pace.”

“Yes, I’m free; let’s go!” Lena nodded enthusiastically. The gloom that had hung over her head ever since the lieutenant colonel’s visit went flying out the window.

To reach the town closest to the hotel, they needed to cross the lake. They got on one of the ferries that shuttled passengers, not unlike a tram or a metro, and watched as the red rooftops characteristic of the Alliance’s cities came into view.

Neither Shin nor Lena chose this city for any particular reason. They bought some sort of cold confection from one of the stalls set up along the main plaza and watched a street performer make his tamed cats dance around. Lena spent a good while staring at a strange, handcrafted doll.

“...Do you think I could teach TP to do those kinds of tricks? Jump and somersault like that?”

“TP might be able to do that, but I don’t think you’d be able to train it regularly. You spoil it,” Shin said teasingly.

“...Hmph,” Lena scoffed. “I do *not* spoil him. You’re just cold to him. And he *still* likes you better. It’s not fair, if you ask me.”

Lena’s miffed reaction made Shin chuckle. Hearing him laugh made her exceedingly happy, and before long, she was giggling, too. There were other Processors who would come to town to relax, and every now and then, the two of them spotted a familiar face in the crowd.

“Hey, it’s Shin and Lena,” they said. “Check out the fried sweets they’re selling over there.”

Being a land of trade and commerce, the Alliance’s culture had mingled over many years with the small countries to the south of the mountains. And so the town was quite new and unusual for Lena and Shin, who had grown up and lived in the cities of the Republic and the Federacy.

Lena in particular was used to the flat terrain of Liberté et Égalité, and so the uneven territories of the Alliance and the city being built on a steep slope was quite the exciting difference for her.

Many of the people passing by were Caerulea with silver and golden hair and blue eyes. This reminded her of Daiya, a boy whom she never met, who was also apparently a Caerulea. It was he who had adopted TP first.

“Even back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, they said TP was the most attached to you... He wasn’t called that back then, though. And we didn’t know each other’s names or faces.”

“At the time, I was wondering when you’d get tired of talking to us and stop Resonating.”

Looking ahead, she saw Shin put a few picture postcards he bought at a souvenir shop into his bag. Apparently, he was going to give them to his grandparents. His paternal grandfather, Marquis Nouzen, and his maternal grandmother, Marquis Maika. He was keeping in touch with them, but since they’d only been introduced last month, things were still a bit awkward between them. Still, they were all trying to forge a familial bond.

Two years ago, Shin thought Lena was a naive girl with a bleeding heart who was pretending to be a saint. And as such, he simply called her Handler One. But now things were different. In much the same way, he had avoided meeting his grandparents, and now he was trying to grow closer to them.

It was a big adjustment for Shin. And seeing him change for the better made Lena happy. But...it also made her feel a bit lonely.

“Especially after you heard Kaie’s voice, I was...pretty sure you wouldn’t Resonate again.”

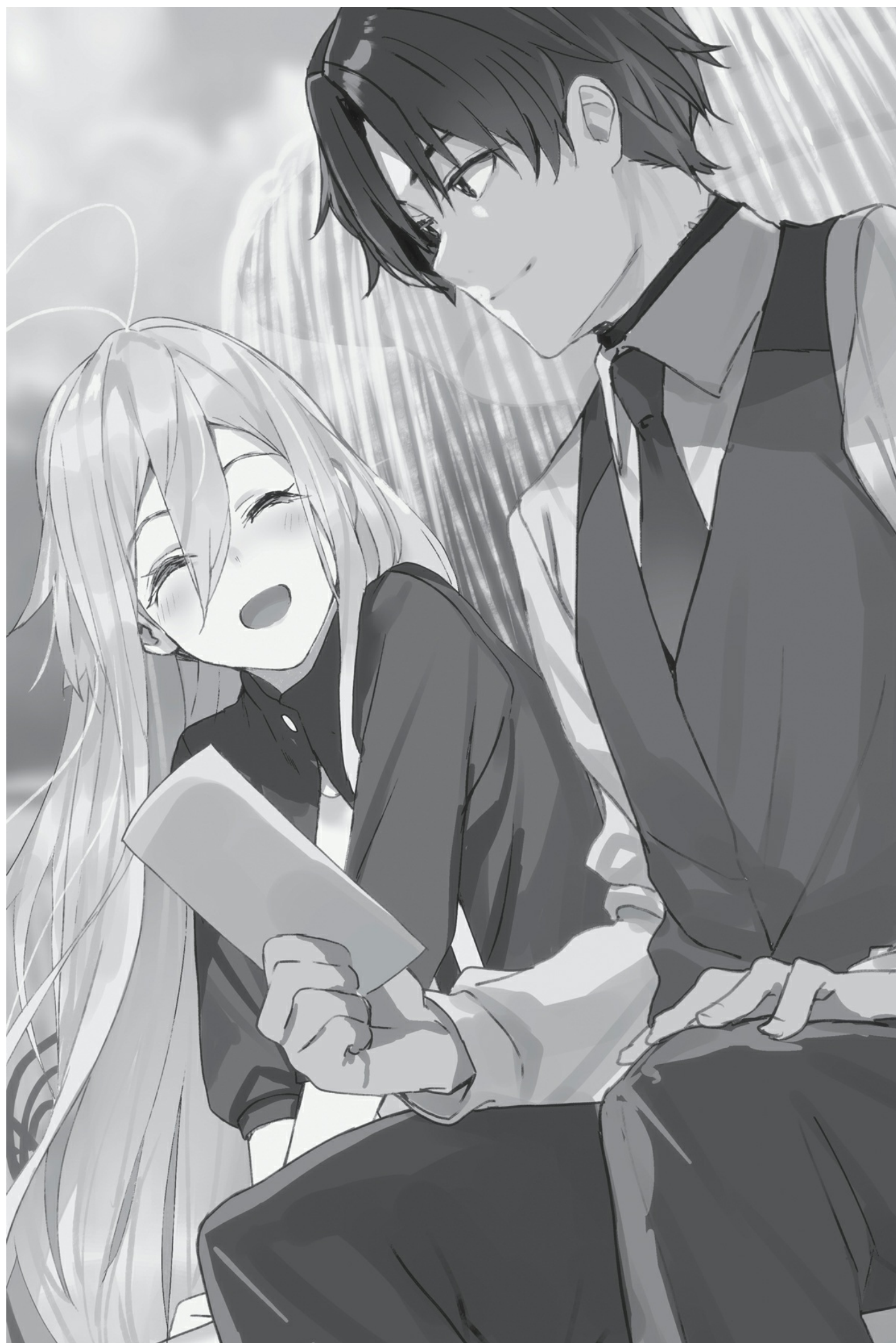
“Honestly...I was a bit scared, and that’s why it took me so long to muster up the courage.”

“I was surprised. Not by how long it took you, but by the fact that you were the only Handler who Resonated with me again after being exposed to so many of the Legion’s voices from that close.”

Shin took in the view of the summer skyline, which was as cool as it was radiant.

“...Looking back on it now, I think it’s a good thing we didn’t push you away.”

The tone in which he said those words made Lena’s heart skip a beat. Some part of her felt she couldn’t hear the rest of whatever he had to say right at this moment. She wasn’t prepared yet... Her heart wasn’t ready.



“E-er...”

“Huh, Nouzen.” A voice suddenly interrupted their exchange.

It was Marcel. Shin stopped in his tracks, and Lena, whom Marcel apparently didn’t see, came into view.

“...And Lena. Uh, looks like you were in the middle of something. I’ll, uh, make myself scarce.”

“...No, it’s fine... Don’t worry about it,” Shin said, cocking his head as he looked at the red-roofed, wooden-framework shop behind Marcel. “That’s a strange store for you to be in.”

Adorable stuffed animals lined the shop window. Apparently, it was a toy store that focused on the Alliance’s traditional crafts. Marcel, with his sharp eyes and prickly hair, stood out rather oddly between the fluffy plushies of wildcats lining the shelves.

“Oh, this? I just figured since we got the chance to go abroad, I’d buy Nina a gift. Not like I have any taste for this...,” he grumpily appended, looking around at the various plushies.

He was apparently torn between buying a few small ones that could sit in the palm of her hand or one of the bigger ones sitting on the shelf—that were as large as several stuffed animals combined but not too unwieldy for a child to carry around.

After a moment of contemplation, Shin took a bill from his wallet and presented it to Marcel.

“Let me pitch in, too.”

Marcel eyed him with surprise for a second, then cracked a smile.

“Sure. I’ll say it’s from her big brother’s friend... I won’t be specific, so she won’t piece it together.”

He added that last part in a hurry, recalling certain events. Lena didn’t understand what it meant.

“...Someday, when things settle down, you should meet her. Eugene kept

writing about you in his letters, so their grandma wants to meet you, too. And I'm sure Nina will want to know about you, once she's old enough to remember. Though, I think it'd be better if you didn't tell them how it all ended."

"Right." Shin smiled bitterly and shrugged. "I'd like it if she didn't hear any more bad stories about me."

"C'mon... I apologized, didn't I...? Anyway, sorry for interrupting."

Pulling down one of the larger stuffed animals from the shelf, Marcel headed for the cash register. He opened the store's glass door, and as a bell rang, they heard the clerk's greeting.

Lena, who had kept silent...or rather, was forced to stay silent throughout the exchange, asked a question as she watched Marcel leave.

"Who were you talking about?"

Nina and Eugene. Those were both unfamiliar names to her.

"A friend of ours from the special officer academy—and his little sister... Ernst insisted that the Spearhead squadron members all go to different special officer academies, and that's when I met him."

Thinking back, Lena did recall how Shin, Raiden, Kurena, and the rest all seemed to have acquaintances among the soldiers in Rüstkammer and varied Federacy bases. Some of them were soldiers similar in age, and others were older noncommissioned officers who would thank them for saving their lives at one point or another. Lena didn't know any of those people.

"Eugene died before the large-scale offensive, and Marcel seemed to know him even before that, so he knew Nina, his sister. I happened to know her, too."

"..."

This was a story she didn't know, of people she'd never heard of. And once she thought about it, it seemed painfully obvious. It'd been two years since Shin went out on the Special Reconnaissance mission and found his way to the Federacy. He'd spent two years of his life in the Federacy, two years of experiences and human relations.

It wasn't just Grethe and Marcel. He had formed bonds with many people Lena didn't know... Even outside the Eighty-Sixth Sector's battlefield, he'd tried to live his life.

A life in the Federacy... A life without Lena.

And once again, for whatever reason...that feeling filled her with the slightest bit of loneliness.

"...Why did you come here personally? You're the chief of staff."

"Are you seriously asking me that, Grethe? It was you who reported a Republic officer visiting this place, without informing the Federacy ahead of time."

Grethe's gaze fell on the chief of staff, Willem Ehrenfried, who was seated alone on the sofa with an air of leisurely composure and a thin smile. One of the hotel's rooms was hurriedly prepared for his visit.

"I am the one who organized this trip if you recall. Having a cheeky weißhaare trudge into this place would only cause the Eighty-Six undue distress. And so I, in my gracious concern, came all this way to check on the matter."

His wording made Grethe raise an eyebrow. A Republic citizen or two wouldn't bother the Eighty-Six at this point, and Willem knew this ever since the Charité Underground Labyrinth operation. The only one really bothered by it was Lena.

"So that's your pretense."

"This room's been swept clean. You can speak freely."

In other words, even though this was another country's facility, they didn't need to worry about walking into a trap.

"I'm sure you know this already, but your presence here is classified information. That includes Colonel Milizé's whereabouts," Willem said.

A unit's assignment and activities were a state secret. An outsider should have had no way of knowing that the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package's 1st Armored Division was on leave or how long they'd be on leave. To say nothing of the fact that some of them were sent to the Alliance.

In other words... Grethe narrowed her eyes.

That lieutenant colonel visited Lena based on information he should not have had access to. Same as how the Legion kept ambushing and attacking the Strike Package, despite its activities being kept under wraps.

“The lieutenant colonel’s visit proves he has access to this leaked information,” Grethe concluded.

“And revealing that to us is quite careless of both him and whoever’s backing him. Well, it doesn’t come as a surprise. The Republic’s actual soldiers died ten years ago in defense of their countries. The people running their military now are effectively inexperienced novices.”

Willem shrugged.

His aide, who was always at his back like a shadow, wasn’t in this room.

“Captain Nouzen did a good job of driving the lieutenant colonel away. He left the same day he came... Still, if we pursue him quickly enough, we could catch up to him before he gets home. It’s a long way to the Republic from here.”



“Talking to it didn’t help any. I don’t get what that queen wants, exactly.”

As Annette angrily fired off the same complaints the interrogation officers had been repeating for the last two weeks, Shin, who was seated across the table from her, looked at her. They were in a lounge in the same underground base as the interrogation room.

Also present were Vika and Lena, who were equally bewildered.

“It told us to come find it because it had something to say, right? So we came on over and caught it, and now it’s giving us the silent treatment? At this point, we might as well pry its central processor open and see if we can pull out its memories that way. This is stupid.”

“As odd as it may sound coming from me, you’re quite the frightening one,” Vika commented dryly.

“Its memories don’t lie behind an encrypted program within its central processor but inside its neural network. There’s no telling if we can actually

output its memories anyway.” Annette bitterly poked a hole into her own suggestion.

“What about her mother...? I mean, couldn’t they bring her over to try to convince her?” Lena suggested meekly.

“She’s bedridden in a hospital.” Vika shook his head. “Disturbing her even a little could kill her. We can’t use someone like that as a hostage.”

“I...see.”

“Don’t force yourself to say things that don’t sit well with you, Lena,” Annette told her. “I can tell how hard it was for you to suggest that.”

Lena dropped her shoulders, and Shin suppressed the urge to sigh. He could tell she wanted to be of use in this conversation, but he didn’t want her to say cruel things while her expression was riddled with guilt.

...And Lena had been acting strange as of late. At first, he thought it was because of that Bleacher’s visit, but even when he took her to town in an attempt to cheer her up, her anxiety didn’t subside.

“Your Highness, do you have any idea why the queen’s not talking?” Annette asked him.

“That’s a difficult question to answer. I’d only spoken to her a handful of times when she was still alive. That message she sent could have just been a trap to lure Nouzen and me in...”

And there was always the chance that the Merciless Queen wasn’t Zelene to begin with, but they willingly pushed that possibility to the back of their minds. If that was true, it would mean they’d gone to the trouble of capturing it for nothing.

With that said, Vika furrowed his brows.

“Or perhaps she intended to share information initially but refuses to share it *with us*. Her homeland was the Empire, and the Federacy is effectively the country that destroyed it. Even if that’s not the case, Zelene was a soldier. She didn’t favor war.”

“But she was a soldier...” Shin cocked an eyebrow.

“Let me ask you, then. You’re a soldier. Do *you* like war?”

...Ah.

“Major Birkenbaum was a soldier, yes... But she only became one out of her hatred for war. Her older brother was a soldier as well, and he lost his life in combat. She said that was her impetus for creating the Legion... And for as cold and reclusive as she was, her face was that of a witch, cursing the world.”

Turning a glance to Lerche, who stood behind him, Vika shrugged in self-derision.

“Zelene herself was injured and nearing death at the time, so she was likely quite pressed to act. I can’t imagine she would bring herself to create something like the Legion unless she was fully consumed by the idea... For example, have you realized that none of the Legion’s aerial units are weaponized? That prohibition doesn’t stem from a problem in IFF recognition, if you ask me. It’s because Zelene *hated* armed aircrafts. That older brother of hers died when a friendly craft accidentally fired on him.”

She probably thought there could be no trusting armed aircrafts or the people piloting them. And she likely hated war because it destroyed her family—and even cut away at her own life.

“...If she was so opposed to war, then why create the Legion?”

“Far be it from me to know... Wanting to destroy something out of hatred may not be the most sensible approach, but it happens all too often.”

Wanting to destroy the world she cursed and reviled, not unlike a witch.

“That’s the extent of what I understand about her... But perhaps you picked up some kind of clue, Nouzen? If nothing else, your father knew Zelene far better than I did.”

“No... I don’t think I ever met her.”

“Nothing, then...,” Vika lamented.

Annette shrugged grandly, as if to shake up the mood.

“Well, here’s a weird thought to chew on. Had things happened a bit differently, the two of you could have been childhood friends... And that applies

to me, too, come to think of it... Whoa, creepy..."

"Speaking of friends... Nouzen, what of Fido? I thought it strange when I heard of the one drone the Republic actually did develop, but was it not completed?"

An odd pause hung between them.

"...Fido?" Shin repeated the name dubiously.

He cocked his head at Vika, as if wondering why that name left his lips.

"Do you not remember that, either? It was the prototype for the artificial-intelligence model your father was researching. I recall him complaining that his youngest son...that is to say, you...named it Fido and wouldn't agree to have its name changed."

It wasn't the Scavenger Fido but some other Fido. Yet...sadly, Shin couldn't remember anything of the sort. The most he could eventually uncover in his memory was the faint feeling that there might have been something like it in the past, but he couldn't remember its name. Maybe it *was* called Fido, Shin thought, as Annette groaned next to him.

"Ugh, you mean that weird robot dog, right? I think Shin's dad called it... Prototype 008... Wait." Annette suddenly regarded Shin with half-lidded eyes. "You gave your Scavenger the same name? You really haven't grown out of that crappy naming sense, have you? You're giving Lena a run for her money."

"If you're talking about TP, I can't say I appreciate the comparison."

"You guys are mean," Lena muttered to herself sullenly, which both Shin and Annette tacitly ignored.

"My naming sense is at least better than the way you named things in the Eighty-Sixth Sector," Annette said, keeping up her argument. "You were going to call it Remarque, right? Maybe you were trying to be cynical, but it's so roundabout, it just doesn't make sense."

"You say that, Rita, but why did you try to raise a chicken back then? It was a hen, but for some reason, it chased you around like a rooster."

"What, are you trying to say it was weird? Chickens are cute. And I enjoyed its eggs up until the large-scale offensive."

“.....Oh.”

“What’s with that face?! I’m a better cook than I was back then! Oh, and I didn’t forget about that one time I made you a batch of cookies, and you asked if they were monsters!”

“...They were sweets, yes, but they were charred black and had three eyes apiece.”

“Yeah?! Well, at least you recognized them as baked goods! It’s not like you can accurately identify a food after it’s been burned black, right?! You can’t, can you?! Dummy! Idiot! Moron!”

“...Ahem!” Lena loudly cut their argument short.

At some point, they’d regressed to the petty squabbles they had as children, but her exclamation made them come to their senses. Shin suddenly realized, in a rush of incomprehensible guilt, that he’d never called Annette Rita in front of Lena before.

“So what happened to that...Prototype 008, Annette?”

“...Well, they took Shin and his family to the internment camps, and I never saw it again, no matter how much I looked for it.”

She assumed it was broken. Either as part of the pillaging or out of some kind of half-hearted game.

“So it was lost in vain, you say... A pity.”

Vika shook his head, half in disappointment, half in amusement. Annette looked at him questioningly, to which he shrugged.

“That one was a different kind of AI compared with the Sirins and the Legion. One developed entirely to be a companion pet. To that end, if it was ordered to fight to defend someone, it would do so. The Legion aren’t human. They cannot fulfill a wish to be friends and companions to humankind. The only ones who would have had the duty to defend people, who could find our place...are those who would see us as friends.”

“So you’re saying...,” Annette said, her eyes wide with shock, “...we dug our own graves...?”

“Annette? What do you...?” Lena asked.

“I mean, that’s what it means! If Shin’s dad had been allowed the time to complete the Fido project... If the Eighty-Six hadn’t been persecuted, the Republic *really could have had a war with zero casualties!*”

Ah...

Lena felt her blood freeze.

The Republic “loaded” the Processors onto their drones with the pretense of them being information-processing units, and they did it because they couldn’t develop an AI advanced enough to perform fully autonomous combat. Because they couldn’t maintain their defensive front without stripping the Eighty-Six of their human rights and casting them out into the battlefield.

But if Fido had been completed... If it’d been established as an artificial intelligence capable of autonomous combat...

“We said we did it because we had to. We turned a blind eye to injustice while knowing we were committing a grave sin. We let millions die only for it all to be exposed, for every other country in the world to denounce us. But all that persecution wasn’t even necessary in the first place. If we’d only done what was right, neither the Eighty-Six nor the Republic’s people would have had to die... It’s... Just what kind...?”

Annette gritted her teeth bitterly at Lena’s words. Shin kept quiet, worried that anything he might say would come across as an accusation. Even though none of it was Lena’s fault.

But the two of them couldn’t see it that way.

“What kind of cruel irony is this...?!”

The hotel’s guest rooms were all doubles. Raiden roomed with Shin. He was out at a meeting regarding the Merciless Queen but came back a bit sooner than planned, just as Raiden poured himself a fresh cup of coffee from the room’s kettle.

“Oh, hey, welcome back.”

“Yeah. Thanks,” Shin said, accepting the mug he handed him and narrowing

his eyes in amusement. “You know, Kujo and Daiya, they always used to call you our squad’s mom.”

“Oh...? Give that mug back; I’ll put a few spoons of mustard in your coffee.”

“You’ve got mustard handy? You really are the squad mom, aren’t you?”

“The hell?”

The two of them wrestled over the mug for a while, albeit carefully enough so as to not spill the coffee.

“...What are you even doing here this early? There’s still a while before dinner,” Shin asked.

“I just figured I’d wash my clothes before that shindig on the last day... You should probably do some laundry, too. Wouldn’t want your clothes to be all dirty and wrinkled when it’s go time, right?”

“Okay, Mom...”

“Fuck off.”

Having finished their coffee, the two of them took playful jabs at each other a while longer. The fact that Shin could easily dispatch him in a mock sparring match left Raiden very unamused.

“...Speaking of, you’ve definitely shaken off that Reaper atmosphere you always had going on.”

Shin only replied with a questioning glance, to which Raiden responded, sitting cross-legged on his bed with his chin resting on his hands.

“Especially when it comes to Lena. You’d always call her Handler One, but now you call her by her name. And when you said *I’m off* and spoke of how you’d show her the sea... I didn’t think the eastern front’s Reaper was capable of it... Oh yeah,” Raiden appended with a smirk. “Don’t use the interrogation as an excuse to run away. Just tell her already.”

“...Shut up.”

“If ya need a situation to set the mood, we can back you up. How about a spot with a nice night view...? I guess the last day we’re here would be the best time,

though.”

“Shut up... I was gonna say it last time, but Marcel interrupted.”

“Still, you’d better do it in a way that makes her happy. Even a blockhead like you can figure that out, right?”

“...”

Shin fell silent, which caused Raiden to realize he’d probably played with fire long enough, so he clammed up, too. Shin was...clearly displeased. Like a carefree child who didn’t need to bottle up his emotions.

“...And now you can even make that sort of face,” Raiden whispered to himself, so Shin wouldn’t hear it.

He carefully looked up at Shin.

“What?” Shin asked him grumpily.

“Nothing.”

I was just thinking that you really have changed.

Raiden shooed him out of the room, telling him that the bath was still open so he should go clean himself off. Shin left with a dubious expression.

Raiden watched the door shut and pondered things. When they first met, he really thought he’d run into the Grim Reaper occupying the body of a boy his age. His expressions, his gaze, the heart beating within him—they had all frozen over. Ground to dust. Chipped.

But now, that very same boy knew how to smile naturally. Especially since meeting that kindhearted crybaby of a Handler.

“...Guess it’s not all bad, huh?”

The country that was supposedly his homeland had ordered him to die. The brother he once cherished nearly murdered him. The battlefield he stood on was closed off by the Legion, and he was forced to bury his beloved comrades time and again. After weathering all of it and more, the only thing he had left was the cold, dead heart of a reaper.

The malice of humankind and the cruelty of the world had made Shin what he

was.

But at the very end, he was still able to learn that it was okay for him to seek salvation. It was okay for him to dream. He learned that there was still the slightest speck of something that might be called hope within him. That this fetid shithole of a world wasn't completely irredeemable.

For the first time in his life, the Reaper had something to live for.

That name was a curse of sorts. It was a shackle that bound him to the cross he carried—but that cross also fixed him in place. The drive to gun down his brother's ghost was both a curse and a blessing: an objective that spurred him forward.

To take all their dead comrades to their final destination. Having that role was what kept Shin from collapsing on the wayside. What kept him going, one step at a time, even one step forward, until the very end.

But even so... They were the ones who were being saved and supported by him.

"You've saved us plenty of times already... It's time we let you live your life, man."

On his way to the bathhouse, Shin ran into Captain Aegis, who was speaking to the Processors who weren't participating in the test. Watching the captain's long black hair sway like a tail, Shin thought of TP, the black kitten Daiya picked up once upon a time. Only its paws were white, like socks.

At the time, they didn't give it a name and just called it whatever came to mind. Back then, they thought Lena was just an irresponsible handler of livestock, living smugly in the safety of the walls.

When had he decided to give her a formal good-bye...? Why had he thought that entrusting her with that wish would be right? Why was it that he placed so much faith in her back then?

Shin's eyes suddenly widened.

"Captain Nouzen. We're currently considering disassembling it. Its uncooperative nature is only making the option seem that much more viable.

Perhaps letting it know of our intent could serve as a bargaining chip...”

“No.”

Shin curtly cut off the intelligence section chief’s words. They were speaking in Shin’s room.

Doing that would be meaningless. The Legion don’t fear death, and threats don’t faze them.

“Forget that, Section Chief... Let me into the confinement room.”

Everyone present was rendered speechless by Shin’s suggestion.

“What are you...?” Lena reflexively started saying, but Shin cut her words short with a look.

His eyes communicated that he had no intention of doing anything careless. He wasn’t like before, when he thought little of his own death. The section chief exchanged glances with the other people in charge of the room—one in a violet uniform and another in olive drab—before agreeing.

“Check that the restraints are working as intended. And keep the machine guns primed and ready in case we need to dispose of it. What do you think your chances of getting it to talk are, Captain?”

“The Merciless Queen went out of its way to reveal itself to me in the Dragon Fang Mountain. It didn’t try to kill me, and it even led Raiden and the others to me. So if my guess as to why it did that is correct...”

The lock to the confinement room’s gate, which was sealed off by reinforced alloy bolts, came undone. The two-layered doors opened, leaving only the door on the observation room’s side.

“Leave the Para-RAID on...,” the section chief said. “And don’t get too close. The moment we feel it poses a danger to you, we will gun it down.”

The gate was made up of thick metal walls and was essentially a long passageway. Shin passed through the door without another word. It closed behind him, after which the door to the confinement room finally opened. He stood at the boundary between the confinement room and the corridor, at a point where the floor’s material changed, as if to demarcate a borderline.

Noticing his presence, the Merciless Queen stirred like an insect reacting to prey, trying to rise to its feet. But the constraints prevented it from doing so. It was an almost reflexive sort of movement, a mechanical reaction.

Because, yes, the Legion slaughter all that stand before them. Be they people, cities, countries, or armies, they trample anything in their path without distinction. Such were their instincts. It was the same as how a land mine cared little for the identity of whomever triggered it. They were weapons that killed indiscriminately.

But in the magma lake of the Dragon Fang Mountain, this Merciless Queen rebelled against those instincts and made no attempt to kill him. It simply crept closer, as if to toy with him. Or perhaps appraise him. But of course, there was always the chance things would have gone another way had he faced it any longer. Had Raiden and the others not gone after it, and had no one been there to stop it, things might have played out differently.

“I know you can hear my voice, Queen of the Legion.”

Shin realized bitterly that not having a name to address it by was inconvenient. He couldn't call it Zelene, because if it wasn't her, the queen could try to impersonate her. And calling it the Merciless Queen wasn't right, either. So only being able to give it this moniker struck Shin as irritating.

Back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, he always viewed names as nothing more than symbols used for the sake of designation. And he always hated his own name for sounding so close to the word *sin*...

But two years ago, he didn't give Lena his name until she asked to hear it. And looking back on it now, he had to wonder how he ever led such a life.

“You were the one who called for me, weren't you? *Come find me*, you said. And I did. So if you have anything to say, I'll listen. Right here, right now. And if you won't answer, I'll leave.”

It was hard to say they were occupying the same room, since there was a good ten meters between them. But as the Merciless Queen's moonlike optical sensor stared fixedly at him without blinking, Shin thought he could see a hint of panic in its gaze.

He'd felt it for seven years. The mechanical monstrosities' bloodlust. He could sense it seeping through the Ameise's armor. The constraints creaked heavily.

Two years ago, he could believe in Lena. A girl he'd never met from within the walls. And he could trust her because he chose to get to know her. To speak to her, to listen to what she had to say... Because they could learn to know each other.

Had they not conversed, they never would have grown closer. And one can't trust in someone or something they don't know. And so he decided to do this, one-sidedly, without trying to test her.

The creaking of the constraints died down. It raised its white armor ever so slightly, and a faint silvery glow began to seep out of it. Liquid Micromachines. Searching his memory, Shin knew that the Phönix was the only Legion unit confirmed to possess the ability of turning them into butterflies and flying away.

But there was another unit that he recalled making use of them in some fashion. His brother—the Dinosauria Shepherd. The "hands" that extended from it. The hands that gently reached out to him at the very end... Hands that, like a person's, could no doubt strangle just as easily as they could caress.

"I know nothing about you. I don't know why you called me or even why you're silent right now. So I want you to tell me, with your own words."

The Liquid Micromachines continued seeping out. But just as Shin began to dread they would take a physical form...

<<Leave this confinement room. Evacuation to observation room advised.>>

It was like audio being played from an old record. Like the sound of a sentient, inhuman being forcing itself to speak in the human tongue. It was a mechanical voice that was incredibly difficult to make out.

The voice came from an information terminal that allowed for audio communications, which was set inside the confinement room. It had been activated without anyone touching it, opening a holo-screen full of static noise. The stressing and volume of this static noise was used to produce human words.

Shin could hear the surprised tumult filling the observation room through the Sensory Resonance coming from the RAID Device sitting on his uniform's collar. He couldn't blame them for being shocked. This was probably the first dialogue between a human and a Legion unit in all recorded history.

He could hear Vika mutter to himself, saying he could see now that it dreaded the idea of killing Shin, even by accident.

<<Once evacuation is complete, response to queries will commence. Evacuate to observation room. This is a warning.>>

Shepherds were made by assimilating the neural networks of humans, but there could be no telling how much of their human consciousness and emotions remained. But in that moment, Shin believed he had felt it.

The Merciless Queen's indignant rage.

<<Your resolve to negotiate at the risk of death is remarkable. However, any further attempts to do so will be met with rejection. Remember this.>>

Lena watched that sight unfold in stunned silence. He wasn't intentionally exposing himself because he'd expected to die. Lena understood this. But there were hardly any reports of a Legion unit exposing its Liquid Micromachines outside its body and operating them independently. Not in the Republic, Federacy, United Kingdom, Alliance, nor any of the other small countries.

There were only a handful of similar cases, including the case of the Dinosauria, Shin, and Raiden, and the other reported was Rei. Apparently, this ability wasn't common to all Shepherds. It was possible that only Legion who were explicitly programmed with the ability, like the Phönix, were capable of this.

And to that end, they weren't wary of the possibility of it using its Liquid Micromachines as a means to attack. Perhaps the Merciless Queen just happened to have the ability to use them that way. But normally, Liquid Micromachines weren't used as weapons, but rather, components of their control system. They didn't move with the irrational speed the Legion normally had, to begin with.

It couldn't see Shin through the light the Liquid Micromachines gave off, but it could tell he was standing on guard. Speaking while carefully trying to ascertain

the right moment to get away if need be. And he hadn't taken one step out of the corridor even before the silvery glow appeared, so he could quickly move to the other end of the corridor if need be.

He was willing to brave risks for the sake of this discussion, but he wasn't throwing himself away. He did this for the sake of the future he wished for—to find the means to grasp it.

And seeing him do it left Lena in blank amazement. It made her realize something. He really...did change.

Just as Shin returned to the observation room, Liquid Micromachine arms slithered out of the gaps in the Merciless Queen's armor, as if unable to wait any longer. They weren't long enough to reach the walls from the Merciless Queen's position in the center of the confinement room, but as if to compensate for their length, there was a startling number of them.

Returning to the observation room made Shin's tense nerves ease up a bit. Maybe that was why the memory of his brother's hands strangling him—and not just his hands as a Shepherd, but his real hands, too—rose to the surface in all its vivid, chilling horror. It made the color drain from his face for a moment.

"Are you all right, Nouzen?" Vika asked, noticing the change.

"Yeah... I'm fine. I just remembered something."

Vika likely realized he'd probably suffered some injuries relating to hands, or perhaps he was injured by a Shepherd.

"You stood before her, knowing she could pry open an old wound. You forced yourself to get her to talk... Even though it was you who insisted there could be no conversing with the dead."

"I still think so, even now..."

The living can never mingle with the dead. That was a rule of nature. No matter how much one wished to speak to them, the rules this world operated on would remain cold and unyielding.

But at the end of the Special Reconnaissance mission, when he was defeated in the depths of the Legion's territories... His brother probably saved him. They

couldn't converse, but their voices did reach each other.

Shin could hear the voices of the ghosts, which implied the opposite could possibly be true, too. But what if conversing with ghosts actually was feasible... but the ghosts simply didn't transmit their thoughts in a manner Shin could understand?

The living can never mingle with the dead. But perhaps the ghosts who lingered between life and death, who hadn't yet crossed the river Lethe, could still reach out to him, who remained tethered to the far shore.

It was a theory that struck Shin as slightly disturbing, but he wasn't going to run away from it anymore.

"I just wanted to do everything I could... If we can get even the slightest bit of beneficial information, we could be one step closer to ending the war."

Vika regarded his words with an amused smile for some reason.

"You want to show her the sea, hmm? I see. So you would spare no effort to that end."

"Why do you know about that, too...?"

"Why would you assume I didn't know about it...? But never mind that."

Upon seeing that the color had returned to Shin's face, Vika turned in the Merciless Queen's direction.

"Are those hands something all Legion who've assimilated the neural network of a dead person possess?"

The microphone was on, of course, and the window was set to transparent. But the queen didn't answer his question. Vika signaled to Shin with his eyes, who repeated the question. This time, it replied.

<<Only those who have, even in their final moments, extended their hands in maddened despair, possess this.>>

It's like the Legion's screams, Shin thought.

Their brains echoed those screams. Their minds twisted into the shapes of their final words, repeating the emotions they felt on the brink of death. Their desires would not die even as their bodies perished and, instead, would

manifest themselves as those hands.

Unsure if it could only hear Shin or if it consciously chose to answer just his questions, the intelligence officers whispered among themselves, so as to be heard over the microphone. The section chief stressed they would need to take precautions against the arms coming out of its armor next time.

<<One question has been answered. Answer a question in turn, .>>

The final word it said was exceptionally hard to make out. It was as if mechanical language had been forcibly rendered into sound. But the recorder terminal just barely picked up what it had said.

Báleygr.

That was the Legion's identifier for Shin.

<<Your name.>>

Shin shot a gaze at the intelligence staff, one of whom nodded.

"Shinei Nouzen."

He didn't add his rank and affiliation. The room was shielded from electromagnetic interference. Even if an Eintagsfliege had somehow wandered into the room and tried to function as a relay, the Merciless Queen would not have been able to transmit any information to the Legion. But Shin decided to err on the side of caution.

The Merciless Queen fell silent for a moment, as if swallowing its breath.

<<Nouzen. Nouzen. Descendant of the destroyers. Progeny of the Empire's Ebony General. Query. Why did a Nouzen betray his homeland and defect to the Federacy's military? Is it because you are a rotegig? Answer.>>

Rotegig. Red eye. A derogatory term that pureblood Onyxes of noble descent used to refer to children mixed with Pyrope blood. Hearing the Merciless Queen speak that word made the Pyrope information officers in the room harden their expressions in displeasure. But Shin was born in the Republic and raised in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, so the slur didn't register as offensive to him.

"I'm not of the Empire."

<<Then you are an Eighty-Six.>>

“...How do you know that?”

If it was Zelene Birkenbaum, it should have had no way of knowing what an Eighty-Six was. That derogatory term didn't exist in her lifetime.

<<For they were weak. For they were brittle. For they were the inferior race expelled from the Republic. Seizing them was simple. Obtaining information from them was simple.>>

They had means of drawing out information from a seized brain. No... Even a Shepherd couldn't resist the Legion's instincts, and perhaps higher directives sent out by commander units. The fact that the Merciless Queen was conversing with them could have very well only been possible because it was cut off from the rest of the Legion's network.

“And what's your name?”

He'd estimated he understood the principle it was working on. It issued a query, and he answered. Thus, it was his turn to ask a question. And so he asked what he should have opened with.

For whatever reason, that question made the Merciless Queen tilt its body somewhat. As if confused or perhaps disappointed that its provocation fell on deaf ears.

<<It is presumed you already know.>>

“I answered your question... Please answer mine.”

Upon being asked again, the Merciless Queen swerved its gaze to Vika, who stood beside Shin.

<<Affirmative. Albeit, unnecessary. Confirm it with the Innocent Olden Serpent.>>

Vika grimaced for a moment, then heaved a long sigh.

“So it really is you, Zelene.”

<<Affirmative.>>

The Merciless Queen, Zelene Birkenbaum, nodded ever so slightly. Haughtily. With the cruelty of the ice-white moon—a cruelty that befit her identifier.

<<My name... The name I was known by when I yet lived...was Zelene Birkenbaum. Ranked Major. Researcher. Affiliated with the Imperial Research Institute.>>

She stressed that it was her name when she was still alive. As if to implicitly emphasize the fact that she was no longer human.

Slipping out of the loud, boisterous interrogation room, Lena went into the corridor to escape the noise and looked up. This was an underground base, and the sky naturally wasn't in sight. All she could see was the cold, artificial gray of the ceiling.

Shin really had changed. When he faced the Republic's lieutenant colonel, he showed a clear contempt for his malice. He'd fostered bonds with his newly rediscovered family and the people who were by his side and made efforts to maintain those bonds. He went back to calling Annette Rita. He was starting to pick up the bits and pieces of the joy he once knew from the depths of his memories.

Even with the world being so cold and unwelcoming, even as he had nothing to expect from it... He still looked to the future, seeking to make his dreams come true.

And Lena thought that was a good thing. She was happy for him, but...she also felt a certain loneliness, as if she was being left behind. And anxiety, as if the ground she was standing on were fading away.

She thought he was weak, but...in the end, he really was a strong person. Even with all those weak points, and even though he couldn't see the light at the end of the tunnel, he still had the strength to keep on walking—to reach out and grasp his one desire.

But that meant a time might come when Shin wouldn't need her anymore. And the moment she thought of that, a heavy, overwhelming sense of fear came over her. Even if he didn't yet, he'd definitely realize it someday. That the person he wanted to show the sea to...*didn't have to be her*.

It wasn't like this before. Two years ago, Shin was still trapped in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. He was fated to die within six months, and all around him were other Eighty-Six, who shared that fate. The only person he had to ask to remember him was Lena. It wasn't because she was special in some way. She just happened to be the one person Shin knew would live on.

But now that wasn't the case anymore. He'd survived the Eighty-Sixth Sector

and was freed from that fate of certain death. So were Raiden and the others. He'd lived in the Federacy for two years, forging new bonds with people who wouldn't leave him behind.

And so Lena was no longer the only person he could live with.

But the same couldn't be said for Lena. She'd only come this far because Shin told her to catch up to him. She could only fight on because she could chase after his shadow. Without Shin, she couldn't fight. Without him relying on her... she couldn't pretend she was strong.

She wanted him to rely on her. She desperately clung to the role of being the one he needed, the one he begged to not leave him behind. She wanted to support him, to guide him... To continue acting out the role of a saint for him, even if it was just a lie.

The pride I take in fighting at his side is all I have. My precious role of being the one who holds him up. If I lose that... If Shin leaves me... I won't be able to keep going... And when he does, I won't be able to do the same... I won't be allowed to cling to him, to beg that he not leave me behind...

But so long as Lena was part of the Strike Package, it would keep serving as proof of the validity of the Republic's "progressive, humane defense system." Of the idea that the Republic citizens didn't need to fight. Of the Eighty-Sixth Sector's battlefield of zero casualties.

Shin had finally shaken off that illusion, and Lena was worried about becoming the shackle that tethered him to it once more. So she couldn't cling to him. She didn't want to hurt him—to weigh him down.

Because...I'm one of the Republic's white pigs, after all...

CHAPTER 3

FOG BLUE

“—Oh. There are girls here, too.”

The final checks for the Juggernaut’s new weapon, the Armée Furieuse, were happening. As Kurena was taking a break after completing one of the day’s checklists, she looked in the direction of the voices coming from behind the container.

The Merciless Queen, Zelene Birkenbaum, had finally responded to Shin, which meant he spent significantly more time questioning her. Zelene herself made it clear that she wouldn’t speak at all unless Shin was there. As a result, Shin didn’t have the privilege of taking part in the Armée Furieuse’s testing, so Raiden, Theo, Anju, and Kurena ended up covering for him.

Kurena had turned to face them, but the source of those voices—a group of Alliance soldiers, apparently—didn’t notice her and continued chatting idly. About half of them were Caerulea, with blond hair and blue eyes.

Just like Daiya. The thought crossed Kurena’s mind.

“They’re cute. But wow, they let them fight at this age?”

“I always imagined child soldiers who were forced to fight would be more... you know...like stray dogs—brats who curse everyone and everything.”

“Well, if the rumors are true, they’re monsters who fight just like those bloodless war machines.”

“But they’re cute, y’know? Almost normal.”

“...Tch. That one’s looking... She probably heard us.”

Some of them awkwardly raised their hand apologetically, while others scratched their heads uncomfortably. They then regarded her with frank smiles.

“Good luck out there!”

“Thanks!” Kurena nodded back.

Right, Shin had his hands full with other work. That was why she and the others had to work hard in his place. But still...

Her gaze fell on the Prussian-blue uniform sitting between the containers.

What are you doing, Lena...?

“Lena’s been acting kind of strange lately.”

Having spent their childhoods in the Eighty-Sixth Sector’s barracks and internment camps, where there was no real distinction between the sexes, the Eighty-Six had little understanding of the reasoning behind why pubescent boys and girls weren’t allowed to share certain spaces.

Michihi spoke, taking out the cosmetics she’d bought from the lakeside city. Shana, who had gone with her, as well as Yuuto and Rito, who had tagged along to carry their bags, nodded at her statement.

Michihi opened a few lipsticks she bought, comparing their shades, while Shana wasted no time in opening a bottle of nail polish and painting her nails. The big event was coming up, and they needed to practice.

“...Shana, you really don’t need to paint *my* nails, too,” Rito said.

“C’mon, you’re cute, Rito... I could just eat you up.”

“You’re scaring me, Shana...”

“I figured we’d set the two of them up so they couldn’t run off anywhere, but that won’t work when she’s that anxious. And it looks like Shin’s decided to bide his time for now, as well...”

Yuuto paused for a moment in contemplation.

“I think it’s because Lena’s the same as us,” he eventually said.

“What do you mean?” Michihi asked.

“Lena lost everything in the large-scale offensive. Her family, her home, all the people she knew in the Republic except for Annette. The Republic was her homeland.”

She didn't have a country to call home anymore. No family to protect, nowhere to return to. Nothing to live for...save one thing.

"...Ah," Rito whispered. "She's just like us. All she has is her pride, so without that, she doesn't know what to do with herself. But there's one difference... Lena lost everything recently."

Her wounds were fresh. They were still fresh, and the slightest touch could very well cause Lena to crumble.

"Hey, Shin... Did you notice Lena's been acting kind of weird lately?"

"Yeah."

Cuff links were accessories that acted as fasteners for shirtsleeves that didn't have buttons. But they weren't used on everyday uniforms, to say nothing of the panzer jackets commonly worn as flight suits. Shin was worried about his ability to fasten them, so he tried practicing today. As he confirmed that, true to his suspicions, he was terrible at it, Shin nodded at Theo's questions.

"Ah, so you did... Ah, shit. I can't get it off."

"Maybe it's because the Federacy's cuff links use fasteners...?" Shin wondered aloud. "Anyway, she's been acting kind of weird even before that, but ever since we got Zelene to respond, she's been avoiding me outright."

He'd noticed she left the interrogation room, and he insisted on chasing after her. He found her standing in the corridor, but she just shook her head and said it was nothing... So he simply told her he was always ready to listen if she had anything to say, and then he left.

If she wasn't ready to talk yet, trying to force her to say what was on her mind wouldn't do either of them any good. Shin knew this from experience. A month ago, they were effectively in the same situation, but the roles were reversed.

"I did tell her I'd hear her out when she was ready to talk," Shin said with those thoughts in mind.

"Huh?" Theo stared at him, dumbfounded. "...Are you sure you're Shin and not some Legion wearing his skin?"

"What the hell does that mean?"

“Well... You’d never be that considerate,” Theo replied, still astonished.

“...I’ve got a few things to ask you, Theo.”

Like what his impression of him was, exactly, but Shin managed to stop himself from bringing up that question. After all, he’d been agonized and conflicted so many times before, and every time, Theo and the others always left him be.

He’d been taking advantage of that attitude of theirs for so long. But now, he was the one who could only stand on the sidelines, not knowing what to say. Now he realized how they felt... So he wasn’t one to talk.

“...Being left alone until I sorted things out on my own was easier for me. But that only made it harder for everyone else, who had to wait quietly until that happened. Didn’t it?”

“Your Majesty! Your Majesty! How about putting this on for the *big night*? Sexy, ain’t it?”

Despite knocking, Shiden still opened the door without permission and barged into Lena’s room. Spread out on the bed between them were articles of lingerie Shiden bought in the lakeside town. These were, as one might call them, “lucky” panties. Cute, erotic brassieres, corsets, and a chemise and panties, all meant for setting the mood.

Shiden expected a variety of reactions. *Th-this is...shameless! I can’t wear this!* or maybe *These are your size! Or How do you know my measurements?!* Either way, she thought Lena would go red and start stuttering.

Incidentally, Shiden could estimate Lena’s three sizes just by looking at her.

But Lena was completely out of it, not even sparing a glance at the black leather garter belt Shiden was holding, nor the silver chains dangling from it.

“Your Majesty...? What’s wrong?”

“Huh?”

“I mean... Your clothes for the final day.”

“Right...”

“You’re gonna have Li’l Reaper escort ya, right? So you better doll yourself up even where the sun don’t shine, y’know? I mean...”

Shiden cracked a vulgar smirk.

“...who knows? Maybe you’ll figure out a way for him to see ‘em, right? Don’t worry; I’ll take Annette out for a night at the bar so you two can have the room to yourselves. Just relax and—”

Shiden expected Lena to blush and scold her for the risqué joke, but...

“No... I think Shin might take someone else instead...” Lena hung her head like an anxious child.

“...Huh?” Shiden didn’t understand what Lena meant.

“Shin doesn’t need me... After all, I’m...”

A white pig.

Lena bit her lip, not wanting to say the words. She didn’t have to be the person at Shin’s side. In the end, she was one of the white pigs who hurt him. So one day, they might grow apart.

The spot at Shin’s side didn’t have to be hers.

Picking up on the implication, Shiden sighed.

“...Your Majesty...”

She then grabbed Lena’s slender shoulders and forcibly pushed her down against the bed.

“...?!”

As the bedsprings creaked beneath her, Lena let out a yelp that was a mixture of shock and fear. TP jumped up in surprise and hissed menacingly before taking cover under the desk.

Shiden’s expression was simply that bloodcurdling.

“Shiden...?” Lena asked anxiously.

“...cut it out.”

Shiden glared at her with sharp, cold eyes. It was as if her gaze burned with so

much fury that it had gone full circle and settled in subzero temperatures. So intense was her rage.

“How long are you gonna keep drawing lines and pulling back the *second* something goes even a little wrong? And you call yourself our queen? Sometimes, you gotta pull back. I ain’t gonna argue with that. But you know what?”

Lena was a commander. Sometimes, she had to order her soldiers to die. That was a line she often insisted on not crossing. A line she didn’t want to cross. And yet...

“The line you drew between yourself and us doesn’t need to exist. None of us are gonna call you a white pig anymore, so don’t call yourself one and close yourself off behind walls again. How long do you plan on living in the goddamn Eighty-Sixth Sector?!”

“But I’m from the Republic... The side that hurt you. I hurt you without meaning to... Without even knowing it... And that’s something that’ll never change... It’s all I have!”

Lena’s shout echoed through the room. Her mother died, assimilated by the Legion during the large-scale offensive. Her father died during his attempt to show Lena the cruel reality of the Eighty-Sixth Sector. Karlstahl, Annette’s mother, everyone—they were all dead.

She no longer had a family to protect. No home to go back to. And she even lost the pride she gained from fighting alongside Shin. She was obsessed with the idea of him relying on her, and now she couldn’t even play the role of false saint.

So with all that gone, she had nothing left to build an identity around, with the exception of her roots as a citizen of the Republic. She might have hated those roots to her core, but they were all she had.

“The fuck is that?” Shiden mercilessly scoffed at Lena’s shout. “Who the hell told you that’s all you have? Do you really think you can lose *everything* that easily...? Look me in the eyes.”

Shiden stared hard at Lena, one of her eyes the color of deep indigo and the

other as white as snow. That was the origin of her Personal Name, Cyclops. A heterochromia that made it seem like she was blind in one eye from a distance.

“Both of my dad’s eyes were silver. Not that I’m all that attached to my Alba blood. The heterochromia, I got from my mom. My little sister and I got both of those traits. Wanna know what happened?”



Silver eyes, the same as their oppressors'. Even during peacetime, their mismatched colors would make them tether on the verge of being cast out as outsiders who didn't belong on either side. And she was sent into the Eighty-Sixth Sector with those eyes, where everyone built up indignation and stress that were always on the verge of erupting.

"The same Eighty-Six that the Republic called animals called *us* monsters in human skin. They called us witches. My sister *didn't live long enough to become a Processor...* If I could lose those memories, believe me, I would."

Those memories... That very past.

"But I can't. It's in the past. All of it. All my mistakes, the times I was helpless, the moments I regret—and the choices I made. So you can't lose any of those things, either. You can't undo the fact that you're a Republic soldier who fought with us. You can't ignore the fact that you're not a white pig. You can't deny that you're Bloody Reina, our Bloodstained Queen!"

Even if she was to lose strength tomorrow. Even if she was to part ways with everyone. The battles she fought to get to where she was today belonged to a past she could never overwrite, not even if she wanted to.

"Listen, Lena. You might be from the Republic, but you're not a white pig... You're our queen."

Those words made Lena jerk. It felt like someone told her the same thing before. Those sincere, slightly sorrowful words... As if directed at her, tormented and bound as she was by guilt for never trying to cross the wall between them. When had she heard the sentiment before?

Please stop making that tragic face.

"Maybe in the beginning, our relationship was that of a white pig and a bunch of livestock. But we've already moved past that, and we want you to move on, too. I'm sure Shin feels the same way... So just go ahead bury that mindset already."



"Zelene, I'm asking you one more time. Why did you call me?"

<<The appeal for investigation was directed at any hostile element that would eliminate the High Mobility type. Special Protocol Omega's activation trigger was the High Mobility type's destruction. As such, the recipient of Special Protocol Omega would inevitably be whoever eliminated the High Mobility type.>>

Having decided that not responding after she'd reacted once would be meaningless now, Zelene began consistently answering Shin's questions. But she only answered Shin—and ever so rarely, Vika. As such it was still hard to discern what her objective was and whether she actually was willing to share any intelligence with them.

Lena wasn't here today, either. Her absence worried Shin, but he decided to swallow that anxiety.

"...Then why did you call whoever defeated the Phönix?"

<<Because whoever defeated the High Mobility type would have to be inhuman.>>

There was a hint of mockery in her tone. As if to say Shin wasn't human.

<<For whoever was capable of matching the Legion, who were machines made for slaughter, could not be human. And that is all the truer for anyone who could drive an enhanced unit like the High Mobility type to destruction. Henceforth, they would have great value as a subject of research. A target to be seized. They would hold great value for the fulfillment of the Legion's—of *our*—objectives.>>

And her voice was also full of sinister greed and craving—the desires of a monster who had strayed from the path of humankind. A true killing machine.

"*Lunatic*," someone whispered in a voice thick with contempt. Hearing that word, Shin continued questioning her calmly.

"To what end?"

Zelene's optical sensor swerved toward him. As if drawn by the tone of his voice.

"Why are you trying to enhance the Legion further? Is it to destroy humankind...? If that's your reason, why didn't you kill me back then? Why are you speaking with me right now?"

There was no enmity in his voice. No hatred. He simply asked that question, with no other emotion behind it.

“For what purpose did you create the Legion?”

There was a stark contradiction between Zelene’s words and actions, and Shin assumed it was because she was trying to hide the truth. They had almost forcefully managed to get her to part her tight lips and speak, and they wouldn’t be able to do this again in the future.

Even if they could repeatedly force her to speak, they wouldn’t be able to trust her. And seeing that she refused to give a straight answer, Shin decided not to give her his complete trust in turn. So he simply asked the more pressing question. The one he most wanted to know the answer to.

Zelene was silent for a moment. It was as if she was confused, but at the same time, she betrayed a tinge of fear and anxiety.

<<...Do you...>>

She was a Legion. And while the Ameise were among the weakest Legion units, they were still killing machines that could mercilessly crush a person under their weight. And even so, she still seemed afraid.

<<Do you not hate me, Eighty-Six? The Legion has slaughtered your comrades. Made sport of your comrades. Violated your comrades. Butchered your comrades. Does that not inspire hatred within you?>>

Shin was speechless. She was speaking of his fellow Eighty-Six from the Eighty-Sixth Sector. Yes, to her, they likely seemed to be fragile victims. They all died one after another, as if it was their gruesome, inescapable fate. Cast aside by their country, left without proper command or support, and forced to fight in defective Feldreß.

All too many of them, more than Shin could count... They died far too quickly, far too easily. And each and every one of them was a precious comrade of his. But...

“...No.”

That didn’t mean he hated Zelene—or the Legion. He didn’t.

Zelene slowly lowered her moonlike optical sensor, as if hanging her head. As if to show her rejection. Her fear... Her regret.

<<...Terminating responses. All further queries will be rejected.>>

And from that point forward, the Merciless Queen stopped responding to Shin's words.



"Hey, Lena. Shin's coming over today."

Hearing this, Lena looked up from her paperwork. It was morning, and she was in the base preparing for the final stages of the new equipment's testing. Kurena stood imposingly in front of her, wearing her panzer jacket, both fists poised at her waist.

"Apparently, he had some kind of argument with Zelene, so he said he'd leave her alone for a while and come help us with the Furieuse testing... Don't you wanna see him? Lena, all you've been doing is hiding from Shin in the hotel. Which is fine by me, to be honest. Gives me more time to spend with him."

"...But—"

Lena met her eyes, and Kurena responded with a challenging glare.

"Hey. Get ahold of yourself... Ugh, listen. I don't like that you're taking him away from me."

Kurena advanced on her. Lena was naturally the taller of the two, and this fact was exacerbated by her high heels. But that didn't matter one bit to Kurena.

God, this girl is a piece of work. She's drop-dead gorgeous and doesn't feel like she belongs on the battlefield at all. She forced herself into our lives and swiped Shin from me in the blink of an eye. I can't stand her.

"But I *hate* the idea of someone other than you stealing him from me. If it's you, Lena, I...I can accept it. So..."

He never once looked at me the way he looks at you. He only ever saw me as a comrade, as a little sister. I couldn't save him, so you have to do that in my place.

"...pull yourself together already."

She kept running from him for fear of being rejected, but when she found out he was nearby, she couldn't help but seek him out. She wanted to go to him, to cling to him. Realizing this made Lena bite her unpainted lips.

But I'm from the Republic... I don't have the right to be by his side.

Catching sight of the black hair and bloodred eyes she would never mistake, she almost called out for Shin but stopped herself. Thankfully, there was considerable distance between them, and Shin wouldn't have noticed her unless she yelled for him.

But then Lena froze in place.

Standing in front of the massive steel frame of the Armée Furieuse were Shin and an officer with long black hair, wearing the uniform of the Alliance. The two of them were chatting and laughing. They were so close, they were almost touching—a distance that came across as improper for a man and a woman who weren't lovers.

The officer chuckled, playfully smacking Shin on the shoulder. One of them had told a joke, apparently. Shin's back was halfway turned to her, but Lena could still see that he was smiling. A carefree, boyish smile.

...Shin...has never looked as comfortable with me as he does with her... We've never stood so close together... He's never smiled at me like that... So why does he smile for that...that stranger...? I...I don't like it...

At some point, Lena was approached by Guren and Touka from the maintenance crew. Witnessing the same scene as Lena, Guren spoke up.

"It's like he's talking to Alice again... She was a mixed Jet, too, so they look alike."

That was an unfamiliar name.

"Alice?" Lena asked, blinking in confusion.

"Whoa, Colonel." Guren took a step back, apparently realizing Lena was there. "What are you doing here?"

"Who's Alice?"

"Oh... Uh. A squad captain from the base I served in, back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. Well, that was years ago, back when Captain Nouzen was a novice who'd just been drafted. When he only around yea high."

Guren held up a palm horizontally to his waist, as if to illustrate his height. It

seemed too short, even given Shin's age at the time.

"So yeah, Captain Aegis looks similar to Captain Alice. It might just be because they both have Jet blood, but they also *feel* kinda similar—and talk the same way, too. She had long black hair, just like Captain Aegis, and she was beautiful. Thinking back on it, Captain Nouzen was pretty attached to her..."

"Way to go, genius," said Touka, driving her elbow into Guren's ribs.

She'd probably noticed the color gradually drain from Lena's face with every word he spoke. Apparently, Touka put a lot of force to the jab, because Guren let out a little groan before falling silent.

But to Lena, Guren and Touka weren't even there anymore.

No...

A black emotion swirled in Lena's stomach, but her mind, in contrast, was whited out. Shin's captain from when he was first drafted probably came across as a very reliable person. He was attached to her, so she must have been a very kind, sweet person. And this lady was similar to her, so maybe Shin saw some of his old captain in her. They were close enough to chat, to joke around, to be casual and relaxed around each other.

But even so, Lena didn't want this. Not *this*. Even if it was the captain he relied on, or someone who looked like that captain, she didn't want to see Shin look at another woman with an expression he kept from her.

She didn't want someone else to snatch him away. And the moment she realized this, she gasped.

I don't want someone to snatch him away...?

She had convinced herself that she didn't need to be the one to stand at his side. That someday, she would lose her position. And she felt like she didn't have the right to cling to him and beg not to be left behind.

So yes, the moment she dreaded was finally upon her. It was time for her to accept reality with dignity and grace. Why, then? Why did this selfish emotion—this desire not to let him slip through her fingers—take root *now*?

Watching Lena walk away with the gait of a newborn fawn, Touka glared up at

Guren, who stood a head taller than her.

“I must say, I’m impressed, Guren. I don’t think a single word you told her was something she needed to hear.”

“Well, sorry...”

“The colonel isn’t stupid, but even the smartest person can lose their way when it comes to matters of the heart. So knock off the spiteful jokes.”

“I said I’m sorry... I wasn’t trying to make a joke, y’know.”

Guren was avoiding eye contact with Touka. He was clearly aware that he’d messed up. The two of them then kept looking at Shin and the Alliance captain as they spoke in front of the Armée Furieuse. Before long, Theo and Raiden joined in, and Shin continued laughing just as he did back then. His expression when he was talking to Captain Aegis and Raiden greatly contrasted the one Lena wore as she walked away.

“...That little squirt’s already old enough for *this*, huh?” Guren uttered.

“I wouldn’t have imagined that awkward kid from seven years ago turning out like this,” Touka agreed.

He was so sweet and innocent at the time that just looking at him could give you cavities.

“...I wish Alice could have been here to see this,” Guren muttered.

“Well, you just told Colonel Milizé that Captain Aegis looks like a lady Shin used to be close to. I can see why she’d feel pressured.”

“Well, yeah, Nouzen was attached to Alice like she was his big sister or something... But just because they look alike...”

“...Yeah.”

Lena was already gone, and the two of them looked in the direction she wobbled off. Honestly, this wasn’t something Lena should have felt even remotely intimidated by. But well... Love has a way of robbing people of sound judgment.

Lena insisted on going out to check on the new armament despite having no

work obligations that day, so when Annette saw her enter the hotel's lounge with unsteady steps, she was shocked and set down the poetry anthology she'd been reading.

"Lena, what's wrong? You're as pale as a sheet."

"Annette...," said Lena, approaching like a wraith.

A nearby attendant pulled over a chair, and Lena wilted into it.

"Shin was speaking to someone from the Alliance... A person named Olivia... He looked like he was...having fun..."

"Oh... You mean Captain Aegis, the Strike Package's Armeö Furieuse instructor—not to mention an Alliance ace, a melee-combat specialist, and an Esper who can see the future... I've heard it all."

Captain Aegis was scheduled to be assigned to the Armored Division, but being an instructor for the new armament meant close involvement with the research teams and, consequently, Annette. The captain also visited the hotel every now and then with packs of candy to give out.

"I figure they'd have a lot to talk about. Shin's an ace, a master tactician, and a melee-combat specialist, too, after all... And maybe you haven't noticed, but Shin isn't the only person Captain Aegis has been talking to. Raiden, Theo, and even the prince are on that list as well, and they all seem to be getting along quite famously."

"Apparently, Olivia looks a lot like Shin's captain from the first unit he was assigned to back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. Shin's *female* captain."

"Uh-huh..."

That was news to Annette, but she felt that bringing up the sex of Shin's old captain was a little odd.

"And?" Annette asked, unsure as to what Lena was getting at.

"What am I going to do...?!"

"About what?"

"Shin's talking to that captain. He's having fun."

“Yes, you said that already.”

“What am I going to do?!”

“About *what*?”

Lena withered, and she looked like the world was about to end.

“Olivia’s going to snatch him away from me...!”

“...Oh.”

Annette was somehow able to hold back the sigh. She wasn’t sure what Lena would say, but she didn’t think it would be *that*, of all things...

Oh, Lena... You don’t even realize how big of a misunderstanding this is...

But what Lena said next made Annette raise her eyebrows in apprehension.

“Annette, what do I do? I don’t want her to take him away. I can’t stand seeing them together... But I shouldn’t feel this way. But I don’t want her to steal him!”

“What do you mean, you ‘*shouldn’t* feel this way’?”

“I’m...I’m the reason the Republic still won’t recognize the Eighty-Six’s humanity... I’m the reason they still believe the Eighty-Six belong to the Republic... Me being in the Strike Package is only going to burden Shin, so I don’t have any right to feel that way!”

“Those bigots can talk all they want. Even without you around, they’d come up with some other asinine reason. The Eighty-Six don’t care about that at all. You’re overthinking this anyway. Burdens? Rights? What the hell, Lena?”

“Shin would be fine even without me...”

“But he’d be even better *with* you. Besides, remember what Shin told you back in the United Kingdom?”

Annette knew about it since the mission recorder preserved audio. Lena was finally on the verge of tears.

“...But I’m...I’m from the Republic...”

Someone had already scolded her for saying this before, and that only made

Lena feel worse. Annette knew the guilt Lena was feeling all too well but shrugged it off.

“That’s right. You’re from the Republic. And? What does that matter? Did Shin say he hated you for it?”

“...I’m his superior officer.”

“So what?”

If their unit was even remotely like a normal military unit, a romantic affair between an officer and her subordinate might have been a sticky situation. But they were an armed squadron of child soldiers who didn’t even undergo official training, and their commanding officer was teenage girl. The Eighty-Sixth Strike Package was anything but “normal.”

The Eighty-Six never had any sense of a chain of command that distinguished between captains, vice captains, and ordinary members to begin with. They had romantic relationships without regard for any of that, and no one seemed to mind.

“So...”

Lena hesitated to finish that sentence, her two hands resting on her lap clenching into fists. Sensing the next sentiment, Annette finally lost her temper and rose to her feet.

“So what?! Are you going to start looking for excuses to abandon him now? He told you not to leave him behind, and you said you wouldn’t. And now you decide to give up *anyway*?!”

Lena was taken aback. It was clear from her pallid expression that her heart had never once given up.

“That’s not what I meant...!”

“Maybe you didn’t, but it’s all the same. Stop running around and looking for excuses. If you actually give up on him because of this, then you really will have left him behind!”

He picked you, so stop being so pathetic.

That thought burned in Annette’s mind, but she held her tongue. Saying it out

loud would have been pathetic in its own right. Still, seeing Lena take Shin away did make her feel like she was the one abandoned. Her own missteps had severed her bond with Shin once before, and the war only drove them further apart...

But the Shin she grew up with and the Shin she knew now were two different people. They might have been the same person in body and mind, but he had changed too much. Back then, Annette felt something akin to a first love toward her childhood friend, but she didn't feel that same emotion toward the Shin of today. Still, she couldn't completely ignore the fact that someone new was occupying the space that used to be hers alone.

Trace embers flickered in the recesses of her heart. She stared at Lena's back—at her long silver hair—and couldn't help but feel that *she* was the one who belonged at his side.

"Listen. If you don't want someone else to snatch him away... If you still feel that way, despite thinking you don't deserve to be with him... You *have* to work through your feelings."

"I..." Lena opened her lips to speak, then shut them tightly again.

Some part of her felt she was forbidden from saying the words, but Annette knew. Lena's truth was written all over her face. But putting it into words would mean admitting it, so Lena couldn't bring herself to say it. Not yet.

Annette could sympathize. Taking ownership of those feelings was terrifying. The prospect of rejection was intimidating. To bare your soul, only to be turned away... Lena had every right to be afraid. She had pursued him for so long, had finally gotten close to him. A rejection at this point would be devastating. The mere possibility of it was enough to paralyze her.

But...

"Allow me to remind you of something you once told me. If you take your time, the roosters will start to crow. And once they do, any tears you shed will come too late."

"She was disappointed with my answer and cut me off. That's the impression I got."

“I agree with that assessment. It was certainly different from her previous provocations. I can only assume those were her true feelings.”

Poof. Poof.

The sounds of something whizzing through the air and then impacting the wall filled the room, but it was way too soft and nonsensical to come across as gunfire. Shin and Vika, however, ignored the objects flying across the room and continued their conversation.

The courtyard in front of the bathhouse had all its sofas moved against the wall by the employees ahead of time, leaving a spacious open area in the middle of the hall, which was now full of aggressive, excited cries of “Go, go!” and “I’ll get you!”

“Between her message and her attitude, it feels like she’s testing us. Her conditions are destroying the Phönix, and...hating the Legion, I guess? I don’t understand what she wants.”

“In my opinion, you not hating the Legion wasn’t the problem... Oh.”

A pair of pillows flying through the air blew away the heavy mood of their conversation. Had the two of them not bent out of the way, the pillows would have hit them square in the face.

“...Tch, a miss.”

“Our surprise attack was a dud, huh...? I thought the operations commander and the prince were wide open.”

Two relatively young members of the Strike Package still stood in a throwing position as they booed in disappointment. They then looked at their silent operations commander and the United Kingdom’s prince before beaming at them.

“C’mon, you two, play along! ...Unless you’re chicken!”

“Chickens!”

““...”

Shin and Vika looked back at those innocent, reckless boys. Shin was known as the Headless Reaper of the eastern front, while Vika was the infamous

Serpent of Shackles and Decay. Both were experienced Processors.

Excusing this kind of taunt with silence was below them.

“All right, you asked for it.”

“Give me your best shot, peasants.”

And so all hell broke loose.

“—Wha...?”

How did Lena feel about Shin? Annette’s question was one Lena didn’t want to think about, but she tortured herself with it anyway. She had to think about it, lest he slip right through her fingers.

She promised him she wouldn’t leave him behind. That was one promise she could never run away from. Shin silenced his doubts and depended on her, and she couldn’t betray that.

She’d assumed that nobody would be in the bathhouse at that time of day, which meant there’d be a good chance for some self-reflection. She made her way to the bath, steeling her nerves...

...only to find herself standing stock-still at the entrance to the courtyard. The reason? She found Shin, Raiden, Theo, and the other Eighty-Six boys collapsed on the marble floor, sunken between small mountains of pillows.

That wasn’t an exaggeration, either. There were a large number of pillows piled atop one another and strewn across the floor. In addition to the Eighty-Six, Vika, Dustin, and Marcel were also lying motionless on the floor.

Apparently, they were all fresh out of the bath, since they were dressed lightly and had towels with them. Her eyes traveled across the boys lying in pools of white blood—Er, no, the pillows didn’t look remotely like blood.

Coming from a house of strict nobles, playtime was at a premium for young Lena, and she had never seen anything like this before. However, it did register as the aftermath of a Far Eastern phenomenon she’d heard about once before: the time-honored tradition of pillow fighting.



Lerche, who was trying to wake the boys up from the corner of the room, noticed Lena and rose to meet her. Next to her was someone else, who looked at Lena with sapphire-blue eyes.

“My, if it isn’t Lady Bloody Reina...! Sir Reaper has certainly been caught in a most vulnerable state.”

“Bloody Reina... Oh, so you’re the famous Strike Package’s commander... My apologies. I am—” The other person attempted to give a self-introduction.

“—Captain Olivia...!”

Faced with the one person she wanted to see the least, Lena was only barely able to withstand the urge to take a step back. It would be terribly rude but also quite pathetic. Captain Aegis blinked once, puzzled, but soon regained the composed smile of a mature adult and continued speaking.

“Yes, Captain Olivia Aegis of the Alliance Military. A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Colonel.”

“Colonel Vladilena Milizé, tactical commander for the Strike Package... Er, there’s no need to stand on ceremony, Captain. You’re not assigned to our unit yet, and you’re older than me. Besides, we’re still in the middle of our scheduled leave, so...”

Of all the Eighty-Six, only Shin seemed to insist on speaking to Lena formally, which made her dislike it all the more. Yet, while Lena may have been nearly ten years younger than Captain Aegis, she was still a colonel. The captain blinked, taken aback, and then nodded candidly.

“Very well... Then we can dispense with the formalities. No need to call me Captain.”

“Yes... Well, um. What happened here, exactly...?”

Captain Aegis also seemed to be fresh from the bath, gorgeous black locks tied up in the back. The sight of it brushing against the toned neck of a Feldreiß Operator struck even Lena as vividly attractive.

Just then, a startling thought crossed Lena’s mind.

Olivia didn’t go into the bath with the boys, did she...?

Lena couldn't bring herself to voice the question.

"Well... You see, today's laundry day."

...What?

It all started when the pillows in the guest rooms were rounded up to be washed. Having spent plenty of time in this luxurious, lakeside hotel and its hot baths, the boys were relaxed but were also starting to show signs of boredom. The hotel's employees noticed this, of course.

And so they allowed the boys to do something that they normally wouldn't have let anyone do with the laundry. The people in charge of the hotel gave their approval, and they let the boys use the courtyard in front of the bathhouse—which had a tall ceiling and no windows—as the arena for this friendly showdown.

And so the boys' pillow fight grand melee began, all too suddenly.

"...And that's the long and short of it. The hotel staff approved, and the boys knew not to go any further than throwing the pillows. I hope you won't be too hard on them, Colonel."

The pillows were light and had high air resistance, so if they were simply thrown as opposed to being grabbed and waved around, there was little chance of the fabric tearing or the contents of the pillows spilling out. And of course, even a direct hit to the face wouldn't knock anyone out.

The boys were lying down like that simply because they'd fallen asleep. The fatigue of the pillow fight compounded with the grogginess that followed them out of the bath, and they were at the point where their body heat was settling down from the steam. Those who grew sleepy left the fray, and before long, all participants in the pillow fight lay defeated.

Apparently, there were indeed two camps fighting in this contest. Having served as a commander for two years, Lena could tell that much from a glance. Of course, the distinction didn't make the situation any clearer.

Realizing the downed boys were in Lena's way, Captain Aegis went back to waking them up. Each boy was grabbed by the shoulder or the arm and shaken with a casual gesture Lena could never imitate. The moment her hand extended

toward Shin, who was lying down at the center of the hall, Lena raised her voice in an uncharacteristic fashion.

“I-I’ll handle the rest!”

She was loud enough to wake up a few of the boys sleeping next to her. Captain Aegis paused, visibly surprised, and then gave a relaxed smile. The other boys were one thing, but Lena couldn’t let Captain Aegis act so friendly and unreserved toward Shin.

Get your hands off him.

“I’ll wake the rest of them up, so you can head out if you’d like, Captain. Thank you.”

Lena made a shooing motion, and thankfully, the captain did as suggested. Lena then looked over the chaos of the courtyard. Gingerly stepping between the “corpses,” she carefully approached the sleeping Shin.

What counted as sleep for Shin was closer to a typical person’s nap, which meant normally he would wake up just by having someone walk near him. As the boys came to, the ones sleeping next to them also stirred, creating a sort of chain reaction.

Shin, however, was in an unusually deep slumber and wasn’t opening his eyes. Lena sat down next to him and shook him excitedly.

“Sh-Shin. Wake up. You’ll catch a cold if you sleep here.”

Some part of her secretly hoped he would stay asleep, though. That way, he’d remain hers. He wouldn’t go anywhere. He’d stay with her.

Don’t wake up. That way, we can stay together.

Lena pursed her lips. She’d finally admitted it to herself. She wanted to be with him. Forever, if possible.

But now Shin was taking steps toward the future, and Lena was afraid he might leave her behind. So many other people loved him, and someday, he might not need her anymore. The shame of what the Republic did weighed on her, and she couldn’t deny that anxiety she felt.

What if today was the day? The fear of rejection haunted her, and she was on

the verge of giving up on her confession. If Shin rejected her, she would lose the will to fight. Her very identity would unravel.

But even so, she didn't want to give up. She didn't want to pretend she didn't know what her feelings meant, only for someone else to snatch Shin away while she remained complacent. She realized she wanted that least of all. And once she did...she couldn't lie to herself any longer.

I don't want anyone to take him from me. I want him to be mine. So...

Lena pursed her lips tightly.



Unable to sleep properly that night, Lena woke up early. She refrained from waking Annette up and quietly snuck out of her room before dawn. Even in the wee hours, there was someone at the hotel's front desk, and Lena exited the lobby and entered the rose garden, where a carpet of velvety flowers greeted her.

From there, she went to the courtyard, then down a staircase with a brass-colored railing. At the bottom of the stairs was a vast lake of snowmelt. It was chilly even during the summer, and when there was no wind, it brilliantly reflected the moonlight.

The ferry that functioned in place of a tram wasn't working this early. A gentle silence, as if everything had died away, hung between the water's surface and the starry sky it reflected.

As Lena stood at the water's edge, she imagined that the sea might look something like this. But there were no waves since the wind wasn't blowing. All that moved was starlight—a primordial sea of celestial bodies or perhaps the sea at the end of all things.

But just as the thought crossed her mind, someone stood at the edge of her field of vision.

“...Lena?”

That voice.

Lena turned around, surprised.

“Shin...? What are you doing out here at a time like this?”

“I fell asleep at an odd time yesterday, so I just woke up.”

Lena took a seat next to Shin on a log bench and then consciously scooted closer to him. She’d somehow stifled her bashful urge to keep her distance. She fumbled for something to say and eventually asked a question that came to mind. She assumed this wouldn’t come across as awkward.

“Any developments in the Zelene situation?”

“She hasn’t said anything substantial yet... Honestly, it’s something of a stalemate. She refuses to answer any more of my questions.”

Shin then paused, as if something had occurred to him.

“...Actually, yesterday’s pillow fight might have given me an idea about how to move forward with that.”

“That’s definitely a lie,” Lena jabbed at him, giggling.

For the first time in a while, she could speak with him naturally. Shin probably told this uncharacteristic joke to break the ice between them. Lena decided to tell a joke of her own.

“Why not bring Fido along to your meetings with her? Maybe it could communicate better with her somehow. Like, with gestures.”

“Maybe, but first, he’d need to learn how to stop being so needy,” Shin said with an air of exhaustion.

Fido threw (what Lena presumed to be) a tantrum when Shin refused to take it on this trip, too. Shin then looked to the ridgelines, where early sunlight was beginning to peek in from beyond the faint mist.

“...About the Fido my father was researching...”

The AI, Prototype 008. A mechanical intelligence that was neither Legion nor Sirin.

“Maybe it’s because they happen to have the same name, but the idea of Fido being the same as that AI got me thinking. Maybe the reason it’s been following me around and obeying me for these past seven years was because it was *that*

Fido all along.”

According to Vika and Annette, Shin was the one who gave Prototype 008 the name Fido. If that was the case, them sharing the same name wasn’t a coincidence at all. But Shin’s tone wasn’t that of someone stating a theory, but more like that of a child describing what they’d be when they grew up. An insubstantial wish put into words despite the improbability.

In spite of all the Republic’s faults, the Scavengers’ production plant was still a military facility. There was no way an experimental AI could have found its way there. So Shin could only cling to that wish, describing it as if it was some kind of joke.

“If we examine Fido’s core, we might actually find that little one,” he said, smiling faintly. “Who knows? Maybe it’ll recognize me, and we’ll talk about how we haven’t seen each other in so long. And if that happens...”

Shin trailed off, as if hesitating to finish that sentence. The smile left his lips, and his contemplative crimson eyes narrowed momentarily.

“What is it?” Lena asked.

“...Nothing. I just thought that if that was to happen, it’d be pretty sad.”

Lena blinked dubiously. It felt like the direction of what he was trying to say had changed entirely. If he still felt some kind of attachment to that AI, despite not remembering much about it, then the idea that the Fido he knew might have actually been an old friend from his childhood should have been a good one.

“If Fido is still in there, he’d be completed and sent to fight in place of humans. And that doesn’t sit well with me. Even if the Fido we have now could be improved and retrofitted to combat, I wouldn’t want to make him do that. If something wasn’t made for the express purpose of combat, I don’t want to turn it into an instrument of war.”

Maybe it wasn’t alive. Maybe it wasn’t human. But that didn’t mean he wanted to send it out to battle in his place. In Lena’s eyes, Fido was the potential key for a true battlefield with zero casualties. But for Shin, it would be sending another comrade—and possibly a childhood friend—to their death on

the battlefield.

“Remember how we left Fido’s remains in the Juggernaut centograph memorial? It was because at the end of the Special Reconnaissance mission, he was destroyed while trying to protect me in battle. I don’t want to see that happen again. I don’t...want to see him die again.”

Even if he was an awkward, clumsy drone without a shred of human life.

But it was then that the anxiety once again bubbled up in Lena’s heart, rearing its ugly head.

Does that apply to me, too? Are you afraid of seeing me die? Or maybe not die, but disappear? Do you still feel that way?

“Does that apply not just to Fido...? And not just to the Eighty-Six...?”

His crimson eyes found Lena’s.

“Is that what’s been bothering you?” he asked.

Lena stiffened all of a sudden. She froze in place, looking back at him with fear in her eyes. Shin’s lips curled into a clear, sardonic smile.

“I told you already. If you want to talk, I’m always there to listen... And everyone’s noticed, honestly. Our one and only queen is in a funk.”

As Lena raised her head in surprise, the first rays of sunlight shone through. The light of daybreak scattered the dark of night and the stars blinking out of the blue sky of dawn.

And with that sky as his backdrop...

“As for your question... No, I don’t want any of my allies to die. Nothing would be okay if even a single one disappeared. That’s why I carry them with me. Always. And if possible, I want everyone to be with me until the very end. So if you weren’t around, I... Er. I wouldn’t like it.”

Those words seeped into Lena’s heart like a gentle rain falling on an arid wasteland. Yes, Shin had said that from the very beginning. Lena was from the Republic, but she was also the Eighty-Six’s queen. She belonged with them.

Maybe it wasn’t a spot that was reserved for her, but it was still a place she

could return to. He said she was allowed to be there. With that same calm, comforting voice that had saved her time and again.

Aaah.

I knew it. I really do...

Shin, on the other hand, felt a tinge of sadness overtake him as he stared at the horizon. Now was, without a doubt, the time to say it. But he still wavered, was overcome with embarrassment, and only managed to blurt out some vague words.

The thought of Raiden or Theo hearing about this and pestering him was slightly irritating. And the part about him not wanting anyone to die? He would have to take that with him to the grave.

He'd stumbled over his own words. He'd told her that he didn't want anyone to die. So *she*...

When Annette woke up, she saw that Lena wasn't in their room. She was exasperated, however, to see Lena join her table during breakfast. That is to say, she didn't choose Shin's table. She was still indecisive.

Or so Annette thought, until Lena spoke up.

"Annette, I think I've finally decided."

Seeing Annette's newly inquisitive expression, Lena fidgeted a little and then continued in a meek whisper.

"I'm going to...um...tell Shin that I...like him."

Annette's eyes grew wide. She then got to her feet and placed her hands on her friend's shoulders.

"That's great! You finally worked up the courage! Good for you!"

Lena panicked at Annette's loud encouragement, but Shin had long since finished his breakfast and gone off somewhere, while everyone else already knew.



But despite Lena making up her mind, Captain Aegis once again visited the

hotel.

“Now then, children, are you still bored after yesterday?”

As always, the captain’s voice was as clear as a bell—the voice of someone accustomed to giving orders, who was capable of charming people.

I wish she hadn’t come, Lena thought, not daring to say that aloud.

“If so, how about a little underground exploration?”

“Our holy site, Mount Wyrmnest. And the natural fortress of the United Kingdom, the Dragon Fang Mountain. Both of those names actually stem from the same source.”

Captain Aegis commentated as they walked through the tunnel, the sound of their military boots echoing against the sleek surface of the cave walls. It was clearly different from a natural cave, but it also clearly wasn’t dug using machinery. It was like walking within the bowels of some massive creature.

Halfway up Mount Wyrmnest was the entrance to this rock tunnel. Since they were a group of teenagers with more energy to spare than places to expend it, their column soon broke up into groups. Thankfully, the cave was vast enough to accommodate.

Appending that the prince probably knew of this, Captain Aegis continued the songlike explanation.

“It was said that the last of the behemoths escaped to what would become the Dragon Corpse mountain range, where the royal house of the unicorns hunted them down. That was why the place was named after the remains of a dragon. The same holds true for Mount Wyrmnest. It was said that the last wyrms made their home in this mountain—hence, Wyrmnest. The wyrm’s nest. Legends say that the remaining wyrms still nest somewhere in these depths.”

Captain Aegis turned around, heels clicking, and looked up at a tall rock dome and a vast space that were far too large to accommodate a person. The Alliance called this chamber the Hall. No one alive knew for what purpose this place was dug out.

“Perhaps this vast, underground labyrinth was left behind by those wyrms.

Feel free to explore, children. Who knows? You might discover something new.”

“Not to be a stick-in-the-mud, but there’s no way we’d find anything new here. That story is thousands of years old.”

“Well, it’s to set the mood for the exploration. I think it’s fun in its own way.”

With that said, Anju excitedly pulled Dustin by the arm as she went ahead. Dustin was a bit flustered by this, as this was the first time he’d seen her act so assertively. Since they returned from the United Kingdom to the Federacy, he’d taken her out around the Federacy’s cities. Anju wasn’t as familiar with the streets, and he had escorted her as a member of the same unit.

It wasn’t, well, a date.

And he got the impression that while Anju didn’t hate him, she didn’t like him, either. So the reason she pulled him away from the column of boys and girls, tugging at him as if to tear him away from the group, couldn’t have been that she wanted to be alone with him.

He turned around, watching as the row gradually fell apart. Pairs walked off, whispering about the reason for their actions. Raiden, who was escorting Frederica, shot Anju some kind of casual eye signal. That was when Dustin finally realized.

Raiden, Theo, Shiden, Anju, and the others decided to do this ahead of time, all out of consideration for their sluggish Reaper and Queen. Deciding to play along, Dustin looked around and said casually:

“Yuuto, if you go that way, there’s a waterfall.”

“I’ll check it out... Let’s go, Michihi.”

“All right!”

As Dustin and Anju were about to go on a branch of the road themselves, Michihi gave a thumbs-up, and Yuuto nodded as they went off. Anju turned around and pumped a fist victoriously, which made him sigh in relief. It went well.

The two of them broke off from the row and went down a branch in the tunnel, and eventually, they both stopped in place.

“That was a nice excuse, Dustin.”

“Glad to hear it... But you know, those two... They were pretty awkward around each other until recently. You think they’ll be all right?”

“Well, this time, Lena was the one who was acting kind of weird... But I think fussing over every little thing they do is only gonna come off as tactless.”

Dustin thought he could sense a bit of bitterness to her voice, too. As if to say *We’re not that nice, either.*

“I mean, Shin wouldn’t spare poor Kurena a glance even after all this time, so I feel like he needs to earn this. But at times like this, he can be too cautious... Or well, too shy. And then you have Lena getting cold feet...” Anju frowned, as if anxious or frustrated.



“You really love them, don’t you? Your Reaper and your Queen.”

“We do. Especially Shin. We’re a bit overprotective of him whenever possible, I think.”

Although the cave was a tourist attraction, and the visitors’ safety was guaranteed, it still lived up to its name as a labyrinth. There wasn’t anything to light the place up, which made it quite dim, and the path was winding and full of branches. The oddly smooth rock surface had chalcedony mixed into it, which gave it a strange, translucent quality.

Even though Lena checked the map they were given at every turn, she soon got the feeling that she was gradually getting lost. As they advanced into the tunnels, the Eighty-Six around them were disappearing. Sometimes, it was one of them; another time, it was a pair... And before she knew it, it was just her and Shin.

“...? Where did everyone go?” Lena cocked her head curiously.

“They kept branching off, saying they saw something interesting or that they’d race to see who got out first...” Shin shook his head, as if to call this inconsequential. “It feels pretty forced, to be honest.”

“Apparently, the throne room and the dome are up ahead. You can see the fossil of the behemoth’s skeleton there. We can turn back once we get that far.”

“Right... We can’t stay here for too long. It feels like we won’t be able to find our way out once it gets dark.”

There were no lights, and the tunnel felt oddly claustrophobic and scary with its exposed rock walls. Noticing that Lena was trying to hide her anxiety, Shin snuck a glance at her and offered his hand.

“It’s dark, so watch your step.”

“Ah... Thank you.”

Realizing that Shin had seen through her fears, Lena gratefully accepted his hand. He walked ahead, and she followed half a step behind him. This made her realize they both smelled of the same soap. It was the hotel’s original soap,

made from uniquely produced oil, and was placed in the bath for all the guests to use.

The aroma of the soap they used when bathing or when washing up in the mornings was oddly fresh, and she didn't put on her usual, violet-scented perfume that day. So they both smelled the same.

They carried each other's lingering scent.

And the train of thought kept jumping from one association to another. A lingering scent meant...*the morning after*.

Lena felt her face heat up. It was a term she'd only heard of, but the mere mental image of it was too provocative for her. Shin, on the other hand, didn't seem to notice the fact that they shared the same scent, or perhaps he simply didn't think it was that important, because when she looked up at his face, it was as placid as ever.

Lena frowned. True, her imagination was running wild on its own and conjuring up all sorts of exciting images, but the fact that she was the only one feeling giddy over this made her feel silly.

But she was so giddy that she didn't notice Shin's own tension over the sound of her heart beating like a drum nor the coldness of his palms. She wanted him to feel the same way she did, and unable to repress those feelings, the words spilled from her lips.

"Er... I'm sorry about...the way I've been acting lately. I made you worry about me."

They'd entered the throne room's dome, which Shin had mentioned earlier. They'd reached their destination before they knew it. The polished rock face was decorated with what appeared to be pleats, which extended up to the dome's canopy and converged like a spider's web. It was a grand sight, and just looking up at it made Lena feel like it might pluck her soul away.

And sunk into the back wall was a massive, sharp, skeletal eye socket, so large that it was hard to believe it truly belonged to a living creature. It gazed into the throne room with a suffocating sort of solemnity, as if lording over them, like a malevolent god in its ancient temple.

Lena hung her head, as if refusing to meet the bloodred eyes gazing down at her head-on. But without realizing it, she squeezed hard on the hand gripping her.

“But... It made me happy...knowing you were worried about me. Because...”

Because...

He looked down at her with his red eyes. And she realized just how happy being reflected in those crimson depths made her.

“I...”

As the two had their exchange...

“My, could this be...?”

“This is going better than expected.”

“What a lovely atmosphere...”

Anju, Theo, and Frederica looked on from another corridor, whispering to one another. They were hidden behind the rocks of the arched exit, peeking their heads out stealthily. Raiden, Kurena, Shiden, Marcel, Vika, and Annette were in the same spot, divided into camps of boys on the left and girls on the right and looking into what happened under the dome.

“We gave them all that time, and Lena ends up being the one to say it first? That damn moron.”

“C’mon, it’s fine, Raiden. You know what they say: All’s well that ends well.”

“You know what? I don’t like this, after all,” Kurena spat out bitterly.

“What a coincidence, Kurena. The very same thought crossed my mind not a moment ago.” Frederica nodded gravely.

“I thought you were adamant about denying your infatuation with Nouzen, Kukumila. Isn’t it about time you come clean?” Vika asked her.

“Infatu—?! What?! No, I—I don’t feel that way!”

“Yes, that’s what he meant, Kukumila.”

“...Your Highness, I, er, think your behavior right now is unbecoming a prince of

the lofty United Kingdom.”

“Kurena, Marcel, Lerche, be quiet. If you don’t, they might hear us.”

“What?! I merely admonished you, Your Highness! I did not peek, as the others did!” Lerche said in self-defense.

“Be quiet!” “Shut up, you seven-year-old.”

“...My shame knows no bounds...”

Apparently, their conversation the other day had allowed Lena to sort out her concerns. Shin used the darkness as an excuse to hold her hand, resolving to express the feelings he’d kept on hold until she’d gotten over her anxieties. He’d intended to tell her as soon as he took her hand, but an uncharacteristic bout of suspense silenced him.

After all, they both had the scent of the same soap.

Perhaps owing to the darkness blocking out his field of vision, his other senses became keener. This made him acutely aware that she smelled of the same soap he had used. And since he didn’t make any footsteps as he walked, he could make out the sound of her silver, silken hair as it brushed against him. The slender palm sitting in his hand felt so much warmer than his today.

He had decided he would say it when they reached their destination: the domed throne room. He realized he was stalling, but he’d somehow silenced the fear in his mind and steeled his resolve. But before he could do it, she called out to him, he turned to face her, and his mind ground to halt as her eyes locked on his.

“Because I...”

Shin stood stock-still as he waited for her next words. Her argent eyes looked up at him, and he realized that seeing himself reflected in them made him happy.

Suddenly realizing something, Annette spoke up.

“By the way, Anju, where’s Dustin? I thought he was with you.”

Those words made Anju bite her lip. He *was* with her, at least until halfway through the tunnel, but...

“Dustin, well, er... I was really into exploring the cave, and he might have, er, gotten lost...”

Anju really did enjoy exploring the cave. She did. So it just...happened...

The moment the words spilled from her lips, there would be no stopping them, and she strung them together without any fear or resistance. The only thing on her mind was the person before her eyes now.

“Shin, I...”

I...

But just then, the sound of a large stone being stepped on scrambled the atmosphere.

“Aaaah?!” Lena jolted.

Even Shin became agitated. Both of them reflexively jerked and tensed up, their eyes turning toward one of the tunnels leading into the throne room.

“...Is someone there...?” Lena asked shakily.

Of course, no matter how out of sorts they were, they weren’t going to assume it was a legendary monster said to make its home there. Someone in the shadows was trying to chirp like a cricket or meow like a cat, before eventually appearing from the shadows. It was a tall, silver-haired figure, with hands held in the air for some reason.

“Sorry. It’s me.”

Dustin.

“...”

Lena and Shin regarded him with silence for one long moment. Shin seldom showed emotions to begin with, but the glare of Lena’s wide emotionless eyes made Dustin flinch outright.

Put simply, Lena and Shin instinctively froze up, like a pair of deer in headlights, and their mute expressions were terrifying.

“.....D-don’t mind me... Please continue...”

As Dustin staggered back, multiple sets of hands extended from behind him,

grabbing him by the nape of his neck and clothes, and yanked him into the corridor. Without leaving so much as a yelp, Dustin's tall form was swallowed by the darkness.

"..."

Of course, Lena was by no means brash enough to act as if nothing had happened, and Shin wasn't thickheaded enough to spur her to continue.

"Um..."

A heavy silence settled over the two of them, so thick that the only thing Lena could hear was the thunderous beating of her heartbeat in her ears.

The many hands that had grabbed Dustin pulled him back into a dark, narrow tunnel, where Raiden nearly throttled him.

"Dustin, you idiot!"

"The mood was perfect, and you ruined it!"

"What's the big idea, you moron?! Why'd you have to show up right at that moment?!"

"And how could you tell them that, Jaeger?! 'Don't mind me... Please continue...'?! Are you dense?!"

Everyone was understandably infuriated with Dustin for barging onto the scene right before the ultimate payoff. Even Vika, who was often far more eloquent than most, lost his temper.

Dustin looked around, searching for an ally, but when he saw Anju regard him with a murderous smile...

...Well...I guess I'm dead.

...That was the only conclusion he could come to. She was absolutely livid.

".....Sorry."

Despite the rude interruption, Lena's heart was still beating out of her chest, so some part of her was toying with the idea of simply saying it anyway. Suppressing the bashfulness that would surely overtake her if she was the least bit careless, she steeled her heart.

“Hmm!”

Her voice came out louder than she had intended. So much so that it surprised her, and that surprise made her newfound determination crumble away. The words she wanted to say rose up into her throat but refused to go any further. Lena simply opened and closed her mouth fearfully for a few moments before she finally said something else.

“The, um, Alliance’s captain, Olivia. I see you two talk, well, a lot...”

Some calm part in her mind whispered in denial. That made her sound like she was jealous. It was shameful, embarrassing...

No.

It wasn’t because it was shameful or that it looked like she was jealous. It was because she *really was* jealous.

She was jealous of Olivia—and not just her. She was really jealous of so many other people. She was jealous of Anju, Kurena, and the other girls, who, unlike her, were comrades he could rely on when they were out on the front lines. She was jealous of Frederica, whom he treated like a little sister. Of Annette, who was his childhood friend. Of Grethe, who was his trustworthy superior officer.

She was jealous of Raiden and Theo, who were his closest friends. Oddly enough, she was even jealous of Vika and Marcel, who could speak to him so freely, and Fido, who wasn’t even human.

She wanted him to rely on her. To be the first person he turned to when he needed someone to speak to. She didn’t want him to look at other people... At other women.

“Is, um... Is Olivia your type?”

And what if he said yes? Just imagining it tore at her heart. She was terrified of the answer. And so Lena looked up at Shin fearfully. But in response...

“What?”

...Shin simply looked back at her, astonished. It was as if she’d asked him *Which of these sweets is your favorite?* and then opened a toolbox instead of candy. He couldn’t understand the meaning behind her question on the most

fundamental level.

Lena expected a simple yes or no and had hoped to hear the latter. But what she didn't expect was his complete and utter confusion.

"Wh-what do you—? Er...," Shin mumbled, clearly frazzled. "I mean, I'm aware that many people have those preferences. I knew some people back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector who were—But I'm not... Um... What made you think I am?"

"Huh...?"

It suddenly felt like they were having two completely different conversations—as if there was a fork in the road at a critical juncture, and they had traveled down separate paths. And while they both understood that much, they didn't quite realize who went off track—and where.

Shin was the first to put two and two together, though.

"Lena, I think you may have gotten the wrong impression somewhere along the way."

"A-about what?"

"Captain *Olivier* is engaged. And, um, he's a man."

"I thought something was off about the way you were looking at me, but I didn't think you'd misunderstand *that*, of all things."

When he heard what had happened, Olivier didn't get mad, but he chuckled instead. Lena still couldn't look him in the eye, though.

The other Eighty-Six returned to the cave's entrance hall, where they found Olivier reading a book to pass the time. This exchange happened after that. And now when she really put more thought into it, she realized Olivier did look a bit masculine...so long as one didn't assume he was a woman right off the bat.

His face was quite androgynous, yes, but his voice was too deep to come across as immediately feminine. His bone structure and musculature seemed masculine as well. And now that her preconceived notions had been shattered, she realized he didn't have any visible breasts, either.

"I'm sorry... It's just that, er, your hair is so long and luxurious, and your

perfume smells so nice, so I just assumed...”

“Right.” Olivier smirked as he ran his fingers through his luscious locks.

As he did, the scent of roses—the symbols of June—tickled Lena’s nostrils.

“This perfume was my fiancée’s favorite, so I decided I’d take after her and use it. Operators aren’t allowed to wear rings, so I figured I’d put this on instead. And this hair is my oath to her... You can laugh over how stubborn I’m being.”

All Feldreß Operators across all countries were forbidden from wearing any manner of rings—wedding and engagement rings included—since they could get in the way of piloting and ultimately lead to injury.

Still, the idea of donning matching perfumes was one Lena had never considered. But it did strike her as charming, and for a moment, she thought he must truly love his fiancée...before the realization dawned on her.

It *was* his fiancée’s favorite perfume. Past tense. He refused to cut his hair as an oath to her. The way he smiled when he called himself stubborn.

“Captain Olivier, um... Your fiancée...”

“It was three years ago... The Legion took her away.”

Lena averted her eyes. The shame suffocated her. She had been so jealous of Olivier’s exchanges with Shin, but...

“Did you talk to Shin so often because...?”

Olivier cracked a thin smile. As if an old wound had just been torn open. A ghastly, obsessive smile.

“Is she still out there? If so, where? I wanted to see if he could find her for me. But I believed asking him during our first meeting would be rude, so I talked to him often and tried to establish a rapport.”

Lena realized something. It was not his Esper ability that made him so strong, but rather, this obsession. The hair he refused to cut. His beloved’s perfume. A feminine Personal Name: Anna Maria, which likely was not actually inspired by the tale of the warrior princess.

Shin looked away. The reason he opened his heart to Olivier so easily was because he was once just as obsessed over his brother.

“If she has been assimilated by the Legion, then it has to be me who puts her to rest.”



<<Shinei Nouzen. It has already been stated that all further queries would be rejected.>>

“I heard what you said... But that doesn’t mean I was satisfied with that.”

Shin stood before the final unresolved question. Zelene’s golden optical sensor gazed at him through the glass of the confinement room’s window. And it was there, Shin thought, that her final craving rested. The optical sensor was artificial and should not have harbored any emotion...but there was a light to it.

He’d finally realized that, from the very beginning, she was waiting for something—waiting for someone. Ever since she left the message *Come find me*, not knowing when her words might reach someone or whom they might find.

“Once before, I asked you why you created the Legion. And I still want to hear the answer to that.”

But even as he posed the question, Shin believed he already knew the answer. And if he was right, all her silences, the way she seemed to probe and test him, her strange sense of caution...would make sense.

Had Fido—the AI his father developed—been completed, the Republic may truly have achieved a battlefield of zero casualties. But Shin didn’t like that idea. Even if they did find Fido now and use it to fight the Legion in place of the Federacy’s, Republic’s, and United Kingdom’s soldiers, Shin wasn’t happy about that idea.

But someone who didn’t know Fido, who wasn’t attached to it, might make a different choice. Had his father, who developed the AI for the sake of befriending people, been forced to pick between mass-producing Fido and sending it out to the battlefield or sending people out to fight, perhaps he would have chosen the former, too.

And the same held true for Zelene. Or at least, it held true for her when she

was still alive and developed the Legion.

I...wanted you to come back to me.

Even now, he could hear her final words. The person she called to in her final moments. The brother she lost to friendly fire. The sibling she wished to see returned to her, even as she drew her last breath.

“You created the Legion to fight in our place...so that war would never again claim a human life.”

The golden lunar optical sensor focused on Shin intently. The Legion didn’t fear destruction. They didn’t fear death. They were unflinching, obedient machines, bred for war—created to fight in place of soldiers who would otherwise die by the thousands.

She didn’t create them to kill people. They were never meant to be harbingers of death.

“And you don’t want anyone to die, even now. That’s why you won’t carelessly relinquish the information you possess. You don’t want another country to try to develop technology comparable to the Legion and use it invade other nations.”

When he was young, Vika’s one wish was to bring his mother back to life. Shin’s father, though he could hardly remember what he looked like, attempted to develop artificial intelligence that would live alongside humankind. And Zelene, who had befriended them both, likely felt the same way. All she ever wanted...

“From the very beginning, you were trying to protect people, weren’t you?”

She didn’t want to see anyone die... Just like Shin. For a long moment, Zelene remained silent. And then...

<<Query.>>

Her voice cracked. It was as if she’d attempted to fill it with scorn but failed miserably.

<<Let us assume you are correct. What will you do then? Forgive us? Will you forgive the Legion, Eighty-Six? After we have slain so many of your fragile comrades? We, who have robbed you of your homeland, your family, and your friends? It could have been us who

turned your loved ones against you.>>

For a moment, Shin was at a loss for words. An emotion bubbled up within him. It had been seven years since he learned that his brother was made into a mechanical ghost—and two years since he'd defeated him. But even now, he didn't know what to call this emotion.

"...Yes. That...might be true."

He didn't quite spit out the words. They simply left his lips. He didn't want to fight him. But he was a Legion. He had been turned into a Legion unit, and if Shin didn't destroy the mechanical monstrosity that served as his prison, his brother's soul would likely weep and howl until the end of time.

This was why Shin couldn't leave him behind. He had to fight him.

And the underlying cause was, without a doubt, the restrained Ameise in front of him. It wasn't a question of possibility. This woman was the one who turned his brother against him.

<<Resubmitting query. Why do you not harbor enmity toward us? Why do you not harbor hatred? Why do you not resent us? Why do you...insist on forgiving me?>>

Shin narrowed his eyes. Forgive her?

"I'm not forgiving you... I never resented you in the first place, and I don't want to resent you. Doing that would achieve nothing."

If one was to ask if he was a broken, maddened man, perhaps he would say that he was. He had lost his family and been denied a homeland, but he didn't hate the one who took them from him. No normal person could feel this way.

But even still, he didn't hate her... He didn't want to hate her and couldn't bring himself to. Because he knew. Hating the Alba, resenting the world, loathing the Legion... None of it would bring back what he lost. Hating someone wouldn't make the Alba, the world, nor the Legion suddenly care about the pain and suffering he'd endured.

So he didn't feel any hatred or resentment. Because he knew. He knew those feelings were pointless. Wallowing in them wouldn't result in anything of substance.

And besides...

“Hatred... Resentment... If I chose to hold on to those feelings, I would be no better than the ones who made me what I am.”

That was his—the Eighty-Six’s—pride. It was the only thing they had to their names since they couldn’t even afford to embrace their negative emotions. At the edge of his field of vision, he could see Lena watching over him, her hands clasped before her chest reverently.

And it was then that he realized, ever so slightly, the meaning behind her wish. The world and its people aren’t necessarily kind. The world can be cold and cruel. But in that moment, Shin thought that the nightmare he had lived through might not be an accurate reflection of humankind’s true nature.

He didn’t want to believe that it was.

He knew all too well just how vulgar people could be, more than he could have ever hoped to know. And the examples of truly admirable human nobility were too few and far between. But if he had to choose between one or the other to be the true nature of humanity, he much preferred to pick nobility.

And it was because of that wish that Lena posited that the world ought to be a beautiful place. She knew how ugly the world was but refused to acknowledge this ugliness as the natural order. She refused to give up on the world—not as a simple idea she pursued but as a declaration of her pride.

The worlds they knew may have been different altogether. Perhaps they couldn’t believe in people or in the world the same way just yet. But their desire to never give up—to never grow complacent—was likely one and the same.

And so this was another thing they couldn’t relinquish.

“And you’re not looking to be forgiven, either... You just can’t accept the world as it is right now. You couldn’t accept it, and you wanted to change it.”

She couldn’t accept a world where people had to throw their lives away on the battlefield. Nor could she accept a world in which the Legion she created were the leading contributors to unparalleled bloodshed.

“You don’t want people to die. You didn’t want that when you were alive, and you don’t want it now. And since that was your earnest wish, you want to stop

the war—to stop the Legion. Am I right?”

A long, heavy silence descended upon the room. But eventually, Zelene, the Merciless Queen, gave her answer.

<<Yes.>>

Her voice felt like a long, lamenting sigh. For the first time, her voice struck Shin as truly human.

<<Yes, you’re right. By now, this all feels like nothing more than a series of terrible mistakes, but... All I wanted was to save people.>>

Her words of penitence echoed heavily within the partitioned, closed space. The confinement room and observation rooms were demarcated by a borderline of reinforced acrylic plates. And they stood on both sides of this confessional, like a sinner and a priest, as if she was begging for forgiveness.

And then she said them. The words the Federacy, United Kingdom, and Alliance soldiers had all been waiting to hear.

<<Very well... I will answer your questions. I will tell you all that I know, as well as the information I sought to relay... But only under one condition. Shinei Nouzen. And Viktor Idinarohk. I will speak only to you two. Everyone else must leave. All recordings—all methods of observation and communication must end. Turn everything off.>>



Given the importance of the information Zelene offered, her request was far too simple. But upon hearing what she had to say, Vika could only sigh. A long sigh, uncharacteristic of this cold-blooded serpent who rarely betrayed any sign of emotion, if at all. As if what he was feeling was too much to bear.

“I can’t believe it...”

He temporarily cut off the microphone to the confinement room and shook his head. Abiding by her demands, everyone but Shin and Vika left the observation room.

“There really is a way to shut down all the Legion. But...”

Yes. The Merciless Queen, Zelene, revealed to them the shutdown code for all Legion units deployed across the continent—and the triggering procedure for this code. And yet... Vika shook his head in frustration.

“Triggering it wouldn’t do anything... Worse yet, if we reveal this to the public, human society could fall apart from the inside.”

There was only one position from which the shutdown code could be transmitted... An Imperial fortress that was currently nestled deep within Legion territory.

That wasn’t a critical problem. Even if it was seized by the Legion, they could still retake it. The Strike Package was made explicitly for such purposes, and it would put a definitive end to the Legion War. They could draw forces from other fronts for a concentrated strike.

The problem lay with the one who would transmit the shutdown code. The only one who could do so was a person with command rights over all the Legion. And to register someone as having that right, they would need to be recognized as being descended from the Giadian Imperial bloodline.

Specifically, it would require a genetic match. Only those of royal blood could be acknowledged as commanding authorities over the Legion...and six years ago, the Federacy’s military wiped that bloodline out, leaving not a single member of that family alive. The blood of the Imperial family that ruled over the Empire that died ten years ago. The blue blood of the emperor no longer ran through any living human’s veins.

“If someone could be registered as having the authority to control the Legion, they could very likely control the Legion to do their bidding... This shutdown method is a farce. The Federacy killing the Empire means we’ve lost the means of stopping the Legion, forever.”

Even Vika felt that this was truly a terrible turn of events. His expression was clearly bitter, and he heaved a sigh as he turned a pensive look on Shin.

“We’ll disclose the rest of the information Zelene gave us to the three countries’ intelligence bureaus, but we’ll exclude this. Their latest scheme of operations and the location of their production facilities should be enough to tide them over... Agreed, Nouzen?”

“Agreed.” Shin nodded curtly, steeling his expression and tone.

He knew his emotions rarely showed on his face. His feelings were somewhat

deadened ever since that day ten years ago, when his brother nearly killed him. But in this very moment, Shin was grateful for that. Because he couldn't afford to let even Vika know the truth.

The Legion could be stopped.

It could even be done right now if they were to seize control of the transmission point.

Shin wished he could clear away all the people around them, as there was no telling what anyone might do. Because Vika didn't know. Neither did Lena, Annette, nor the other Eighty-Six with the exception of Raiden, Theo, Anju, and Kurena.

But at least some of the western front's officers knew. Those who took custody of her and spared her life alongside Ernst. They knew she had survived. How would they react once the information got out? Shin couldn't predict that... Just as he couldn't predict what would become of her once all was said and done.

Frederica.

The Giadian Empire's final empress, Augusta Frederica Adel-Adler.

CHAPTER 4

STARLIGHT BLUE

And so the final evening was upon them. The last night of their vacation in the Alliance of Wald. As a crash course in etiquette, all the Eighty-Six were to attend a party that night.

Everyone in the hotel had been abuzz since the early hours of the morning. This included the hotel staff, the orchestra they called in, and of course, the Eighty-Six themselves.

“...Whoa.”

“Wow. It’s so...pretty...”

The Strike Package’s Processors who weren’t of adult age had legal guardians who were all Federacy government officials and former nobles. In other words, people of high class, with the dignity and prestige to match and maintain. This was especially true when it came to meeting people from abroad, even if they were only their wards on paper.

As such, female Processors were delivered evening dresses from their guardians in the Federacy, and they were quite resplendent. Each of them had their family’s crests affixed to their dresses, which were delivered in boxes set with ribbons. These outfits, meant only for this evening, absolutely dazzled the girls, who knew nothing but war. Even the hairdressers and makeup artists working for the hotel couldn’t tear their eyes off them.

Each family’s designer poured their efforts into making a dress that adhered to the latest trends in Federacy fashion. Brilliant red, soft pink, cleansing blue, noble violet, chaste white, and solemn black. And each of them felt unique as they varied in texture: silk and chiffon and velvet laces, adorned with silver and gold embroidery, ribbons, beads, and delicate artificial flowers. Some even had real flowers, picked just for this day.

They were also sent accessories to adorn their necks, wrists, and hair. Modest ones, of course, given their age range, but no less breathtaking.

While each girl donned a brand-new dress, the boys wore suits. They had tall collars around their necks that opened to reveal deep-blue jackets that were almost black. Beneath those were white silk shirts and dark-red cummerbunds.

The sleeves of the jacket were folded back and embroidered with dull silver, and over their left breasts were their badges and medals. The sleeves of their shirts, however, had upturned French cuffs and cuff links in the shape of black-and-red eagle's wings that reflected the light.

In the Federacy, formalwear was provided by the army to noncommissioned officers and rank-and-file soldiers, but officers had to pay for it out of their own pockets. In the past, the nobles were those who commanded soldiers and provided them with weapons, while commoners were conscripted. This tradition was done to highlight the difference between those classes and had persisted into the modern day in the Federacy.

But in exchange for paying for their outfits, officers were given the implicit right to customize and personalize them. This wasn't something they were allowed to do with their panzer jackets, which demanded uniformity as they were their combat apparel. But formal dress and evening clothes, which weren't related to battle, were allowed a certain degree of tasteful modification.

They were mostly changes on the level of the fabric type, the dye's shade, or the cuff link's design. This, too, was likely a custom from the days of the Empire.

So while there wasn't overwhelming variety with the Federacy formalwear, each of the boys' suits had a unique tweak. The shade of blue or black was changed ever so slightly to better complement their hair and eye colors, as well as their skin tone.

It wasn't as prominent as the girls' dresses, of course, but still, their guardians were government officials and former nobles. This was a point of pride for them. Or maybe this was their idea of...perhaps not parental love, but familial obligation.

Watching over them, Vika raised an eyebrow. He was dressed in the United

Kingdom's traditional cravat evening suit.

"Oh, it does suit you. You look quite regal."

Many official outfits and business suits meant for men were based off military uniforms. A business suit's blazer, for example, was modeled after work clothes, and a student uniform's stand-up collar was based on a soldier's uniform. Tuxedos were also modeled after a soldier's style of dress.

In other words, these were outfits meant to accentuate a soldier's—a warrior's—physique. And the Eighty-Six spent their childhoods on the battlefield, their bodies being toned and forged for combat. As such, the outfits fit them perfectly.

However...

"It's kind of suffocating, honestly," Raiden said, fiddling with his collar.

"Get used to it," Vika said, shooting him down.

"Why are we even doing this? Seriously, I never even wanted to go to any of these parties."

Vika scoffed at him, but not mockingly. He was simply amused.

"If you ask me, it's those who aren't used to these affairs who tend to enjoy them the most... And don't worry. Today's event is only being attended by your peers. No one's going to judge you for your bad manners."

In a corner of the dressing room, which was alive with the girls' excited voices, Lena gave herself one final look in front of a full-length mirror. She was in her dress, her hair was done up, and she'd just finished with her makeup artist.

Her reflection gawked back at her, its hairstyle, outfit, and makeup all too different from her usual, uniformed attire. She wore an evening dress she'd bought just for this event. The dress Vika had prepared for her during their visit to the United Kingdom was lovely, but she had no intention of wearing it again.

At least, not in front of Shin. At the time, she wasn't aware of how she felt yet... Though to be fair, some part of her knew the whole time. She just didn't have the courage to admit it. So back then, she could pretend she didn't realize her feelings and put it on.

But things were different now.

She spread out her arms and twirled before the mirror. She couldn't extend them all the way, but the hems of the skirt lifted with her spin, spreading just wide enough to hide the lines of her legs. It was a gorgeous dress. Just like her swimsuit, it was purchased for this trip, chosen specifically for today's function. She spent a long time agonizing over the right fabric, color, and design. She took just as long deciding which makeup and hairstyle would be the perfect complement. And all the while, the thought of the day she would finally put everything together made her heart beat twice as fast.

Yes, she had been eagerly looking forward to this day. When she heard they were going to have a party at the end of their trip, her heart leaped with joy. Worrying over which dress and hairstyle to choose was fun. Prior to this event, she had never enjoyed a party a day in her life.

She had been to parties before. Her Republic pedigree practically demanded her attendance. But she'd never actively *wanted* to take part in those social events. They were nothing more than crucibles of politics, false pretense, fundraising, and abject greed, held in palaces that were mere relics of a bygone era.

Anyone who approached her at those parties was a former noble; their eyes fixed on nothing more than the Milizé family status and fortune. They were headhunting. Meeting their backhanded compliments and superficial attitudes with a smile was torture. Being too fastidious only bought her scorn, and people would mock her as soon as her back was turned. She couldn't bring herself to conform to such pretentious practices. She loathed those parties.

But today was different. She was surrounded by friends... And *he* was here. That changed everything. She dreamed of the moment countless times before the actual trip. Getting dressed up and appearing before him. The expression he would make consumed her thoughts. Her imagination soared with the possibilities of what he might say. And before she knew it, he was all she could think of.

She had to admit it. She had to be honest with herself. Looking away because of shyness or anxiety... She couldn't afford to do that anymore. And true, this

wasn't something to obsess over while they were in the middle of a war... But the moment she looked away could be the moment she lost him. And that terrified her. The thought of being rejected scared her, too, but...she would hate nothing more than losing him without ever letting him know how she felt.

So she decided she'd go through with it. This way, she would have no regrets.

Opening the last velvet box, she took out a delicate handmade choker and placed it around her neck. Annette sent it to her a few days ago, as she celebrated her birthday shortly after their leave began. She told her to put it on if she ended up going to a special event and insisted she didn't forget to wear it during this trip's party.

It was pure gold and crafted in the image of an orange blossom, adorned by red and silver gemstones. Lena clicked the fastener into place, like a knight preparing to march into combat. Looking into the mirror one last time, she nodded to herself.

It's time I made my decision.

The ballroom. While this hotel integrated all styles of interior design—from ancient to archaic to modern—its ballroom was located in the salon of a western mansion fashioned in a restored medieval style. This large hall had served as the site of many social events.

When the estate was just built, it featured a vaulted ceiling. But now it had a transparent glass canopy. The glass was old—its usual transparency now cloudy and distorted—but it was still well polished and supported by a grid fashioned as a silver relief detailing the Alliance's history.

Beyond that lace grid, which made the place feel like a greenhouse or a large birdcage, was the night sky, sprinkled with the stardust of the Alliance's summer constellations. It was the night of a new moon, and the sky was darker than usual.

And beneath that glass canopy, among the orchestra, the countless bouquets, and the tables lined with appetizers, a ring of dance and chatter bloomed like a springtime flower.

"Dustin."

A mezzanine floor, which parted to the left and right, connected to the girls' dressing rooms. It also connected to a stairway, forming a meeting spot before heading down the staircase to the dance floor.

Seeing Anju descend the last flight of stairs and extend a hand to him, Dustin froze in place. Anju's bluish-silver hair flowed down her back like a waterfall of frozen moonlight. The dress she wore was a dark, salvia blue, akin to dusk, which complemented her pale skin and bright hair.

Her dress had countless pleats, like the robes of a goddess, and her matching accessories gleamed with endless celestine gemstones that glittered like the dawn sky. They were beauty and strength. These precious stones were rarely ever cut and set into accessories.

Seeing her pale, slender arm reach out to him made the air freeze in Dustin's lungs.

"...Are you really okay going with me, Anju?" he finally asked.

"I'd be pretty awful if I let anyone other than you escort me, Dustin," Anju said with a teasing smile.

Dustin gingerly took her hand in his. He was a Celena who immigrated to the Republic from the Empire, and since the Celena were considered the noble bloodline of the Alba, he was treated as nobility back in his homeland. Low to midtier nobility, of course, but nobility nonetheless. He'd been taught etiquette for social occasions like this one ever since his youth.

But right now, it was as if he'd forgotten everything he had learned. His every motion was shaky and awkward. Watching him move around like a poorly crafted marionette, Anju smirked.

"Besides, if I don't keep you occupied, you might wander off and ruin the mood for Shin and Lena again."

"Look, I said I was sorry...", Dustin said, frowning pathetically.

Michihi and Shana chewed him out not long after that debacle. And over the following days, Shin was unusually cold to him.

"...I mean, Lena is one thing, but I don't think Shin had any right to get mad at

me...”

“Are you talking about the time we were stranded back in the United Kingdom?”

Back then, it was Shin who burst onto the scene and ruined the mood for Dustin. And unlike Dustin, he clearly did it intentionally. Remembering it made Anju twist her body and look behind her. The dress wasn’t open along the neck and didn’t show her back, of course.

“I couldn’t wear a backless dress for this trip. Nor a bikini.”

Upon her return to the Republic, Anju had started seeing a specialist for her scars. But she had only been in treatment for a month and wasn’t yet comfortable wearing anything revealing.

“There’s always next time. You can wear it then.”

Anju smiled, but Dustin couldn’t shake the feeling she was looking at someone else.

“Right. Next time.”

“Hey.”

“What?”

As they walked toward the hall, their arms locked, Raiden looked down at the person he was escorting. It felt too late to ask this now, but...

“Who came up with this pairing?”

“Well, we’re close in height, I guess?”

Shiden replied nonchalantly. For a woman, she was quite tall, standing at above-average height. She was about as tall as Shin or Vika, meaning she was even taller than the average man.

“There aren’t that many female Processors, y’know? And they won’t let two girls go together because the boys who lost out on partners would probably piss and moan about it.”

“...I hear ya. Plus, going with another guy would suck,” Raiden said, his expression sour.

If any of the guys got caught escorting one another to the party, they'd be laughed out of existence. Because of Raiden's height, there weren't even that many male Processors he could go with... The only guys who came to mind who were the same height as Shiden were Vika, or worse, Shin. That was one nightmare he'd never live down.

"Right? So it's thanks to me that you don't have to suffer through that, Li'l Werewolf. Isn't there something you oughtta be telling me?" She snuggled up against him, pressing her buxom chest against his arm.

Shiden was wearing a white satin dress that beautifully contrasted her dark skin. It had a daring cut that showed a great deal of cleavage and exposed her toned back. There was also a slit down the side that offered a peek at her thighs. The dress as a whole was embroidered with gold thread, which she matched with golden bracelets that chimed delicately with her every step.

Her short hair wasn't done up for the occasion, but she appeared to have applied a glittering product to it, which gave it an extra sheen. Crowned by her shining hair, Shiden regarded Raiden with a proud grin.

"Whatcha think? No need to hold back."

She was obviously fishing for a compliment, but even though he noticed that the makeup added to her femininity, Raiden wasn't the least bit excited.

"Yeah... You're pretty, I guess."

"God dammit, the least you could do is put some feeling behind it! Don't be such a wimp!" Shiden puffed up in a fake show of anger.

She then slapped him on the back a few times with her usual toothy, crocodile smirk.

"Well, you look manly as hell, Raiden. Better watch out. Even I might just fall for ya."

"Yeah, sure. Thanks."

The party was attended by nearly one hundred Processors, as well as Grethe, the maintenance crew, and the support team. The girls wore dresses of various colors, making for a veritable flower field of dazzling shades, and the sound of

laughter and chatter rivaled the loud music of the orchestra.

But in a single moment, the fanfare died all at once for Shin. Lena descended the staircase from the dressing rooms on the mezzanine floor, her hand sliding along the golden railing. Like a dignified crimson rose that emanated purity.

Her rose-colored dress was accentuated by black lace, ribbons, and beads. It was a dress that gave off a sense of dignity—an homage to her moniker, the Bloodstained Queen. Part of her silver hair had been styled into multiple layers of braids and decorated with red roses and black lace, while her slender neck was adorned with an orange-blossom choker inlaid with gemstones.

The fabric of the dress hugged her body, expertly showing off the slender curvature of her limbs as she descended the stairs. It was embroidered with silver roses that refracted the light in floral patterns as she moved. They were like the glowing scales of a mermaid. A beautiful demon that tempted all with her siren song.

Before he knew it, his hand reached for her. Lena reached out to him in turn. They were drawn to each other, instinctively, like magnets. Like gravity drawing water down to the earth. Like a law of nature.

Her delicate hand settled into his palm, hardened from gripping rifle stocks and Feldreß controls. As if those two hands were made for each other, artfully crafted for this very moment. They were a perfect match, and once their fingers interlaced, it was as if they would never part again. He could feel her warmth, but her skin felt colder than his. Or perhaps his body burned hotter than usual.

As Lena walked down the steps, he pulled her closer, and as he did, their breaths were in perfect sync. Somehow, he knew the moment would be perfect. And after she descended one more step, and then another, the two of them stood at equal height.

The aroma of violets hung in the air. Lena's preferred choice of perfume. He thought he was familiar with it, but today, it seemed to fill his mind, intoxicating him and making his head spin.

The heels she wore, slightly higher than pumps, completed her uniform, and so her face was closer to his than usual. Their eyes met, and Lena smiled.

Those silver eyes...

They held hands as naturally as breathing. Normally, she would be too shy to attempt anything of the sort, but in this moment, none of that bothered her. She was altogether taken by the person in front of her.

His suit, the steel hue of the Federacy. It was closed around the neck, and beneath it was a lined shirt. It was very much the attire of a soldier but still gave a certain noble impression. This served as a reminder that despite spending so long on the battlefield, he still drew on the noble blood of the Empire, and this sophisticated appearance fit his refined features perfectly.

The Federacy's formalwear was essentially the same as the Empire's traditional garb, with the only real difference being the color. But looking at Shin now, Lena genuinely thought that whoever designed this outfit long ago must have had him in mind.

She could faintly detect the scent of cologne, which he rarely ever wore. A crisp fragrance, lacking in sweetness—the scent of junipers that seemed to tighten the air somewhat. But just that was enough to make her light-headed.

Yet perhaps more intoxicating still was that unmistakable crimson gaze. His bloodred eyes drinking their fill of her. She felt like she was being drawn in... But then his eyes seemed to widen suddenly.

He stiffened and looked away, at the ceiling, for reasons she couldn't place. And as Lena studied his profile, she noticed that despite his expression remaining unchanged, his face had grown a bit flushed.

“...Shin?”

Lena cocked her head, wanting to inquire, but then she saw it. Shin's uniform was the Federacy's steel gray, and on its sleeve, applied to the silver embroidery of his French cuffs, were a pair of cuff links. They were simple accessories meant to fasten one's sleeve. But the ones Shin wore weren't the Federacy's standard-issue cuff links, fashioned after an eagle.

They were a spectral white, in the shape of orange blossoms, with red gemstones scattered all around them.

A perfect match for the orange-blossom choker inlaid with red gemstones

that Lena was wearing.

The moment Lena realized this, she, too, looked away bashfully.

“Annette...!” she muttered, her face burning red as she looked at the ceiling.

She could tell her cheeks must have been flushed now. It all made sense. Giving a friend a custom-made accessory did strike Lena as odd. And this explained why Annette was so adamant about her wearing it to this party.

“So you got it from Rita, too,” Shin said.

“Too...?!”

“She gave me mine a few days ago, as a belated birthday present. She told me to put it on if I wear a suit or formalwear.”

All the Eighty-Six, Shin included, forgot most everything about their families and hometowns. So of course, many of them didn’t remember their own birthdays. But the personnel files unearthed in the Republic’s headquarters revealed all that information.

However, the Eighty-Six themselves didn’t place much significance on their birthdays and never went to confirm their dates of birth. Eventually, the officer in charge of personnel lost their temper and simply transmitted the information to all of them one day, basically forcibly informing them of their birthdays.

So Annette sent Lena that little gift on her birthday (Shin also sent Lena a birthday present two months later), but Lena had no idea she was planning something like this so far in advance. And it seemed like everyone else knew about this, too. The people around them seemed to have noticed the matching accessories and were hiding teasing smiles, looking away and pretending not to notice anything.

Lena went red, moaning in embarrassment. Her lips trembled in rage at her friend who was currently out of sight.

“Aaaah...! You took this prank too far, Annette...!”

“Achoo!” Annette sneezed.

“What, did you catch a cold, Penrose? Or is someone talking about you behind your back?”

For that day and that day only, he was her partner. Annette looked away and let out a cute little sneeze, and Vika didn't miss the opportunity to draw attention to it. As a pair of experienced dancers, the two were in the middle of a waltz, to set an example for the Eighty-Six, who had never danced like this before.

They moved to the three-count measures, and the hems of Annette's chiffon dress and the rose ribbons in her hair danced through the air. They were adorned by heliotropes of a different shade. The only different colors were the faint-green peridots adorning her dress.

He had a bit of a... No, he had quite the chaotic personality. But Vika was still a prince, and he led her along the dance with natural, flowing movements. Annette had skipped dance lessons over the last few years and hadn't gone to any social events, but she could still dance perfectly well thanks to him.

But not paying that any mind, Annette cracked a bitter smile. The scent of her perfume mixing with his cologne was a bit irritating. Vika was a royal—the prince of the United Kingdom, at that. The cologne he used was high quality, down to the ingredients it was derived from.

Not that her perfume was cheap. They were created by different manufacturers, and both were technically high-class products, made with the idea of mingling with other fragrances. The aromas wouldn't clash. And yet...

"Oh no. I think a certain pair of blockheads finally noticed the covering fire I've been giving them."

Annette didn't look at the blockheads in question as she spoke, but Vika snuck a glance in their direction with his next turn.

"I see. I assume you gave them matching trinkets or something of the sort, without them even noticing. Honestly, how dense can people be?"

"I told them they were birthday presents. A matching choker and cuff links. The fact that it took them so long to notice is pretty annoying, actually."

Lena was one thing, since her birthday was only a few days ago, but Shin's birthday was in May, before the operation in the United Kingdom. A whole two months had passed. Annette made no effort to hide her intentions, either, so

the fact that he hadn't noticed spoke volumes to his indifference and lack of any kind of special emotion toward her.

Apparently, he did hear her when she told him to wear it at the next formal event, so she was content with at least that.

As Vika watched, the two of them stood as stiff as a pair of boards. Some part of Annette wanted to see her plan come to fruition, of course, but she also felt that the two of them were a bit too innocent if wearing matching accessories made them that embarrassed.

Vika returned his attention to her and spoke. It was always hard to tell what he was thinking, but this time, it seemed he was legitimately sympathizing with her.

"You've had a rough go of it, haven't you?"

Annette nodded sagely, as irritating as it was to have this snake prince sympathize with her.

"You have no idea."

Soon after they each internally admonished their best friend or childhood friend, Lena came to a realization and frowned sourly. It happened again just now. He called Annette Rita.

"...Next year, on your birthday... No, this year, on the Holy Birthday. I'll send you new cuff links. Pyrope garnets. They should match your eyes."

"Why?" Shin asked with a dubious expression. "What's this all of a sudden?"

"No reason in particular."

She looked away from him with a pout. She could tell her childish behavior only served to perplex Shin. But explaining what made her upset would be embarrassing. Saying she didn't want him to wear gifts he received from other women was...shameful.

As she looked away from him, she felt her face turn red again.

I really do like him...

Even if it was from her closest friend, and even if she didn't mean it like that,

she didn't want to feel another woman's presence on him. Feeling this way about Annette, who must have done it to cheer her on, to support her, made her experience a bit of guilt. But she still didn't like it.

I don't want to hand him over. Not to anyone.

Still, Shin was the operations commander for the 1st Armored Division, and Lena was the tactical commander. Even if this was a party between those in the Strike Package, they couldn't spend the whole night together. And so the two of them separated for a while and went to speak to other people.

...In truth, Lena wanted to share the first dance with him, but she had the feeling that if she did, she wouldn't want to let go of him.

"May I have this dance, Colonel Milizé?"

Olivier approached her, dressed in the Alliance's evening clothes. His long black hair was tied up at the back of his head with a sapphire hairpin, the same color as his eyes. Coupled with his androgynous appearance, this hairpin looked quite exotic. In this moment, he did look every bit like the man he was—albeit a very slender one.

"Of course, Captain Olivier."

Seeing him now made Lena hate herself a little for feeling so intimidated by his presence before. Even though she was an inexperienced officer in her teens, he still paid her due respect and made an effort to blend in with Shin and the other Processors.

And then came...*that*.

Pretending to gently kiss a lady's hand after taking it was a tradition in the southern regions of the continent, including the Alliance. Seeing Lena panic as she noticed Shin regard the sight with a cold glare made Olivier smile warmly.

Such obvious children, not yet adept at hiding their emotions. Having heard they were hardened by the battlefield of certain death that was the Eighty-Sixth Sector, he thought them to be berserkers who had lost their humanity. And he thought she was a blackhearted, bloodstained queen who would crush the Eighty-Six for the sake of her homeland.

The rumors made them out to be a bunch of monsters... And now Olivier was ashamed for ever thinking that way. Because they weren't monsters. Nor were they heroes. They were children. Perhaps a bit distorted—but children nonetheless. All too immature. All too innocent. Children who were still in their teens.

On the other side of the dance floor, the conductor waved his baton. And so the next song began.

"...Aren't you going to dance with Shin, Kurena?"

"Nah."

The waltz wasn't difficult once they got the rhythm down. As they retraced the steps they were recently taught in school, Theo found he was enjoying himself as he posed the question to his dance partner.

The prince was right. This sort of thing was painless. Kurena nodded at him with a somewhat refreshed expression. But there was still a certain brooding, obstinate flavor to her demeanor.

"I mean, changing partners is normal at parties like this. See? Lena's dancing with Captain Olivier. And Shin's... Huh. Why's he dancing with Frederica...?"

"It's fine... This isn't where I get to stand at Shin's side."

Just saying that struck Theo as cute enough. He didn't really know much about girls' dresses and accessories, but her short hair was done up meticulously. She also had makeup on, which was a rare sight.

Kurena wore a bright daffodil-yellow dress, with a wide ribbon extending from the bottom of her shoulder and down to her chest. It was an adorable design. The skirt was a bit puffy, and each time the two of them turned, it swayed beautifully. She had a yellow tulle bow attached behind her waist and slim, elegant high heels of the same color.

All of it contrasted with the silver ornaments that peeked out every now and then as her chestnut-brown hair swayed. They were rifle shells made into earrings. Had Ernst known about this, he definitely would have objected to her wearing them, and even Theo, who wasn't used to dresses or ornaments, thought they stood out like sore thumbs.

“It’s fine.”

“Come now, Shinei. I shall look you over once more before the *main event*, so lead away.”

“...The height difference makes this too hard.”

“What are you saying, fool? Listen here. In such banquets, a man must never bring shame to a lady. You must commit this to heart first.”

Shin couldn’t help but feel that Frederica didn’t quite qualify to be a “lady” yet, but he knew better than to voice that thought.

Her life was spared when she was taken captive, since she was an infant. Even if the emperors of the defunct Giadian Empire were puppet rulers, Frederica always carried the seed of calamity, as she could be used to overthrow the regime. The revolution turned Giad into a democracy, but with the threat of the Legion looming over the country, many of the nobles retained much of their authority and influence within the Federacy.

And now, Zelene had given him information that had made Frederica that much more valuable, and Shin had to decide what to do with the knowledge. He did consider reporting it to Ernst once they returned to the Federacy and felt he should tell Frederica herself, too. But he wasn’t sure if that was the right thing to do or if maybe doing that wasn’t enough.

He simply didn’t know the Federacy well enough to make that judgment call.

Frederica cocked her head at him curiously. Her colors were the same as his. Bloodred eyes and black hair—an unusual combination in the Federacy.

“Is something the matter?” she asked.

“...No, nothing.”

Now wasn’t the time or place to consider this. Shaking his head once, Shin banished the thought from his mind. Frederica scoffed.

“I know not what bothers you, but you ought to first chase your own desires. Especially tonight. No one shall blame you for doing so.”

Shin felt his lips curl into a smirk. Frederica’s ability allowed her to gaze into the past and present of people she knew, but she couldn’t hear any sounds or

words in her visions. So she shouldn't have known what Zelene had told him.

“Right... Sorry.”

He would have to consider how to approach the matter of Frederica going forward. But tonight... At least for tonight...

Tonight...

“Um, Shiden, don't you think this is a bit much...?”

“Aw, who cares? It's just for tonight, and we're all friends here. Besides, I hear people aren't that uptight about stuff like this nowadays.”

Pairs of the same sex dancing together was generally frowned upon. Lena, who had been educated to abide by these traditions, couldn't help but furrow her brows. Shiden, on the other hand, didn't seem to mind that at all. And so they danced a slow waltz, with Shiden taking the lead and Lena following.

Lena thought—even marveled a little—that Shiden must have learned how to dance from both perspectives, because her movements were incredibly fluid. Officers were considered to have high social standing and were expected to always act refined and according to etiquette. As such, the special officer academy had etiquette as a mandatory subject, and that included ballroom dancing.

Still, they were in the middle of a war. And so the Eighty-Six were given the bare minimum in etiquette lessons to cut down on the amount of time needed to teach them. And yet Shiden's discipline could not be understated. Lena only hoped it was because the Eighty-Six had been looking forward to this party. She wanted them to experience and enjoy new things.

As Shiden led the dance, her eyes darted around, as if aware of everyone around them. Her indigo and white eyes didn't settle on Lena. But her rouge lips moved suddenly.

“Lena.”

Surprised by the address, Lena looked up at her and blinked. She hadn't called her Your Majesty. It felt like an eternity had passed since Shiden last called her by name. Both when they only communicated through Para-RAID and during

the united front after the large-scale offensive. She always frivolously called Lena Your Majesty. Shiden fixed Lena with a thousand-yard stare.

“Don’t you worry about a thing. Today, you take center stage.”

“...If you’re finished with your business, go home, Willem.”

“I just thought I might as well take the opportunity to enjoy the occasion. I am a former Imperial noble, after all. Teaching the Eighty-Six proper etiquette won’t hurt anyone.”

If this party was supposedly a training ground for their etiquette education, they would need someone to set an example. Grethe and the chief of staff, Willem, were supposed to fill that role as a pair, but the atmosphere between them was strained, to say the least.

Grethe was quite unwilling, and the idea of dancing with Willem was her nightmare. She was wearing a black velvet dress adorned with blue beads, which evoked the image of the night sky. Willem’s tall frame was clad in a trademark-blue evening suit.

“Don’t worry; after this song, I’ll fulfill my role and teach one of the girls here how to dance... Does that spark your envy?”

“Not even a little bit.”

Grethe intended to instruct the boys after this, too.

“But I will give credit where it’s due... Thank you for bringing them here,” Grethe said.

At that, the chief of staff regarded her with surprise.

“...You shouldn’t be thanking me. This is just my way of crafting an alibi. So long as it looks like we did everything we could for them, no one would blame the Federacy later down the line. No matter what we do.”

One day, for whatever reason, a time may come where the Federacy and its citizens regard the Eighty-Six as outsiders and cast them out. If the Eighty-Six proved themselves incapable of living in a peaceful society, conflict could erupt.

So if the Federacy could show that it put time and effort into educating and caring for them, they’d be able to save face. They’d be able to appeal to the

other countries and their people—and convince them they had no choice but to cast the Eighty-Six out.

In the end, this was just insurance. A guarantee. And that was why they chose the Alliance—another country—as the destination for this trip.

“I don’t care. A single sheet of paper would have been enough to serve as ‘evidence’ that you tried, but you actually did put effort into it... And these children will definitely appreciate that effort.”

The chief of staff scoffed lightly.

“...I hate the way you always let your emotions get the better of you.”

Grethe chuckled.

“But I like that, for how coldhearted you are, you’re never pointlessly cruel.”

She danced with a few of the other boys and also members of the maintenance crew who were dressed in the same evening clothes and couldn’t get away from the occasion despite not being the ones it was intended for. She spoke to people she hadn’t gotten a chance to talk with often, ate a few appetizers from the tables, and regarded a few awkward invitations to a waltz with a smile.

She was tactical commander for the entire squadron, so she danced with several people. And before she knew it, the evening party was approaching its climax. The waltz music came to an end, and Lena bowed her head to Guren, who was uncharacteristically nervous, as she parted ways with him.

But as she turned around, her high heels clicking against the floor, her eyes widened. The familiar aroma of junipers—the dignified, frigid scent of midwinter—enveloped her. She looked up, her eyes settling on a pair of bloodred eyes standing a head taller than her.

Apparently, he hadn’t noticed her, either, because upon meeting her gaze, his eyes widened slightly.

“...Shin.”

“Lena.”

Standing behind him was Shana, who had apparently just finished dancing

with him. She directed a glance at Lena, then shrugged and walked away. She had the brown skin typical of those with Deseria blood, as well as long black hair and blue eyes.

As she left, her dark crimson dress, which was adorned with a bright red and silver pattern, fluttered with every step. The sidelong glance made it clear to Lena that, as they danced their waltz, she pretended to let Shin lead the dance while actually guiding him over to her.

Annette, Shiden, Shana... All of them were casually trying to help Lena. Just like Lena, Shin had probably made his rounds. It was a man's obligation on such occasions to approach any woman without a partner and strike up conversation or offer a dance.

That said, the other boys were all quite young and timid, so it fell to Shin, their commander, to lead by example. He'd probably been even more obligated than Lena to offer dances.

But now he carried himself perfectly, never once skipping a beat. Their eyes locked. The moment seemed to last an eternity—as if they had surrendered themselves to each other, body and soul. The prelude of the next song brought them back to their senses.

“May I have this dance, Lena?” Shin was the first to work up the courage.

“Y-yes.” She almost reflexively took his extended hand.

His hand was large and firm. They exchanged bows, and he hurriedly put his free hand around her waist. As he supported her, she felt herself rapidly lose her composure.

The music's beat picked up, and Shin took the first step. They moved gently in accordance with the melody, like shorebirds spreading their wings. Shin led her with rare grace, and Lena was overcome with emotion, as if she were a flower petal riding on the winds of summer.

She was awash with euphoria. She felt she could trust him with anything, but at the same time, she worried her emotions would overwhelm her. She recalled Shin's dance teachers grumbling about how he was a quick study, but he was extremely unmotivated.

They only had the one course, and it covered just the basics, but Shin was an Eighty-Six who had survived the Eighty-Sixth Sector. He was light on his feet and could easily mimic the simple steps he'd been taught. And while dancing required not just moving to the music but also harmony between partners, they were used to cooperating when it came to beating the Legion.

If anything, Lena was the one who was unsteady on her feet. She came from a good family in the Republic, and she'd been taught the waltz and other dances, as well. And she danced naturally with the other Eighty-Six boys, with Marcel and Vika and Olivier. But for some reason, she couldn't manage it now. She was constantly one step behind the rhythm, and trying to stay on her feet only made her stumble.

But that was because her heart was beating a mile a minute and sparks were fluttering in her mind. Her legs felt oddly wobbly. She wondered if Shin could hear her heart pounding, but she was nervous to look him in the eye. What if he saw right through her?

So she didn't look up directly. But Shin's face, though a bit unclear, had the same sincere, serene expression.

“ ... ”

Even though she was so excited, so terribly happy that she felt like she might die on the spot, he was so collected.

It's not fair... Lena frowned, her face flushed red.

Despite the fact that Lena frowned right in front of him—or rather, in his arms—Shin failed to notice. His mind was too occupied with desperately re-creating the steps he'd learned less than a month ago.

This wasn't etiquette class, and even though it was just among their circle of friends and colleagues, this was his first time dancing at a real party. It wasn't his first dance of the evening, but being so worked up over it was a new feeling. His first partner was Frederica, and he'd danced with countless others before pairing up with Shana, who had worn a secretive smile all the while. Not a single one of those dance partners had gotten him as flustered as he was now.

And for some reason, his instincts were betraying him. He could only pray

Lena didn't hear his nervous panting. It would be too embarrassing. He could hear his heartbeat, his every artery booming in his ears like an alarm bell.

He knew he was supposed to be occupied with his partner, but he couldn't bring himself to look directly at Lena's face. He knew the moment he did, he'd freeze up. She came from a good family in the Republic and had probably danced plenty of waltzes before, so she wouldn't be nervous. And while he didn't resent or dislike anything about her...it did strike him as unfair.

But despite that, as the elegant music carried on, the two of them gradually grew more comfortable with their situation. All the tension simply melted away. The song ended, and etiquette dictated that they bow, step away from each other, and look for new dance partners. But even after bowing, neither of them let go of the other's hands.

They didn't want to let go. They looked into each other's eyes, communicating that they didn't want to part. There was a short pause in the music as people sought new dance partners. But their hands remained clasped even as the next song began.

Standing in the corner of the ballroom, Lerche leaned against the wall like a shadow. She couldn't attend a party with a sword, and so she didn't carry her saber, but she was clad in her rouge uniform, and her blond hair was done up as always.

Waiters approached her a few times, offering a drink, but she couldn't drink and refused politely each time. There were a couple chairs aligned near the wall for the sake of those who grew tired of dancing. Seated on one of them was Frederica. Lerche walked across the floor, which had a plaited cord design.

"Greetings, little princess. Shall I bring you a drink?"

"No, pay me no mind. I rarely frequent such social affairs."

Her feet didn't reach the floor, so she swung them as they peeked out from the bottom of her dress. She was only meant to make social appearances when she was older, and she wasn't at that age yet. And so she'd never been to this kind of party before.

Her puffy, rose-petal-shaped skirt trailed down to her knees. It was a faint-

green silk dress, adorned with silver lace and ribbons. Her hair wasn't done up, but it was adorned with silver ribbons as well. All of those brought out her delicate, dainty beauty, but this attire as a whole wasn't something a girl her age was meant to wear.

"Aren't you going to dance?" Frederica asked her.

"...I am far too clumsy, I'm afraid."

The knowledge of how to dance, the fundamental steps required to perform a waltz or a traditional minuet, were all stored in her artificial brain. But that didn't mean she knew how to dance. Those were all just records. They weren't experiences, to say nothing of memories.

"I am asking if you do not intend to dance at least once with your master. You can simply have him lead you, and if he does well, you won't need to put forth any effort."

"My. Did your Eye see something, little princess?"

"Not from you. From your master. When one feels something too strongly, I cannot help but see it," she added, a bit apologetic. "But I feel he is waiting for you, actually. A guard is to be the sword and shield of her liege, but your master does not think of you as a mere weapon."

"..."

Perhaps so. But if that was the case...

"That would make me...quite troubled."

As the girl looked up at her with crimson eyes, Lerche shrugged.

"I am but a casket. A coffin fashioned for the one I was modeled after. And the only ones allowed to dance with a coffin are the dead."

And so, since Vika was still alive, he could not take her hand. Because at worst, she, dead as she was, could drag him down with her.

One song played, then ended. Another song began, ran its course, and stopped. And before she knew it, their postures, which had remained dignified and elegant, naturally became less tense. It was as if her consciousness and his had melted into one, and they could somehow tell how the other would move.

At first, they abided by the tempo of the waltz, but before long, Shin and Lena both matched each other's pace instead.

Their two hearts beat as one. And the bliss of it intoxicated them. They each felt complete, fulfilled. It was all so clear now. They raised their heads, joyous smiles playing over their lips.

If, at some point, they would lose track of their wishes for their future... If they would come to fear taking the next step forward. If they were to falter, be hurt by something, waver and stop in their tracks...

They both needed only to take the other's hand as they were now.

The feeling wasn't put into words, but that's how it came across nonetheless. It was like a momentary illusion, a sympathy that broke off the moment the music came to an end. But in that moment, they definitely felt it.

They could understand each other perfectly.

The summer stars twinkled across the old glass ceiling, paying their respects to the moment. The sweet aroma of nocturnal flowers wafted in with the cold night air from the terrace on the other side of the large window.

Seeing the starlight made Lena realize that it was getting late. After a few more songs, they would be given the final address of the night, and then the party would end.

No. It can't. That's not good.

No... I have to tell him before it ends. Because once the party ends, I'll wake up from this dream. I'll go back to being my cowardly self. I'll be a girl who can only pretend to be strong.

So before the final bell tolled... Before the silver dress disappeared... Before she lost her glass slippers... This party, this music, this dance—they were all magic. They stirred the heart of humanity, allowing one to put aside their dignity, to remove their armor, to relinquish everything that inhibited them. It granted a person the courage to bear their soul.

"Shin... Later, um..."

But even so, it took monumental courage to finish that sentence. And so she

spoke, her voice as thin as could be.

“Could we, um, talk...? Aaah!”

Having let her mood turn to something else in the middle of the dance made Lena sink the heel of her shoe into a small seam in the polished wooden floor. Her body lurched forward, and Shin caught her immediately. Her face sank into his chest as she clung to him.

That magical moment, where their heartbeats overlapped, faded away. Their hearts began thumping out of sync once more. And having been caught in what looked like an embrace, the two of them felt as if it were someone else’s actions that drove them into this situation.

Heartbeats once again acted as alarm bells, alerting each of them keenly to the fact that they were incredibly nervous.

Shin thought that the body in his arms felt so gentle and delicate that it might break if he were to hold on to her too strongly.

Lena thought that the body she was clinging to was far more solid and strong than she imagined—a man’s body.

Yes, the moment they became aware of it, they both turned red—especially Lena, who was by no means accustomed to the presence of the opposite sex, and all the blood went to her head, leaving her dizzy.

“Lena?!” Shin whispered, a bit panicked.

Everyone around them was still in the middle of a waltz. Lena clung to his arms for support, her head spinning. Her body grew hot, and it felt like she might explode. Frederica and Raiden happened to be dancing nearby and whispered to him.

“You two have been dancing for a long time. She must’ve gotten dizzy.”

“Why not go out to the terrace for some fresh air? You should escort her there, Shinei.”

Shin left, carrying Lena with him, and as they left, two more onlookers heaved a sigh.

Really, those two...

“Ah, looks like Shin’s finally taking Lena outside.”

“The two of them were so focused on each other that they forgot themselves... But neither of them had the nerve to confess with everyone watching them.”

Theo and Annette approached them, to which Raiden cocked an eyebrow. True, he did agree with what they said, but...

“You’re a weird pair.”

“Well, everyone switched pairs until only the two of us were left.” Theo shrugged.

“And I figured being a wallflower wouldn’t be right in a party like this,” Annette added.

“Where’s Kurena?”

Theo and Annette looked to the center of the ballroom, where Kurena was dancing with Shiden.

“...Two heartbroken maidens sharing a dance, perhaps?” Frederica suggested.

“Cut it out,” Raiden chided her.

“Wait, *two* heartbroken maidens?” Annette raised her eyebrows, surprised. “You mean Shiden’s...? Huh. I guess she did lock horns with Shin a lot over Lena...”

“What, you never noticed?” Theo asked her. “I mean, back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, people just liked who they liked. None of us thought anything of it until we got to the Federacy...”

“You don’t say...”

Annette was a bit astonished by this revelation.

A pair of large, glass double doors led from the ballroom to a stone terrace, large enough to host a gathering in its own right. The polished gray stonework glowed pale in the starlight. Despite it being midsummer, this was still a mountainous country, and the night breeze of the plateaus was quite brisk.

The fence railing of the terrace was fashioned in the image of rose vines, with

fragrant white flowers covering it. Guests groggy from alcohol or dancing would cool down here. A few metallic, ornate benches that were woven into the rails were placed around, and Shin sat Lena down on one of them.

The terrace offered a view of the lake the hotel was built next to, as well as the night sky. Snowmelt flowed into the river, making it too cold to swim in even during the summer. The cold winds blowing down from the perpetually snowy peaks chilled the waters.

A waiter approached them with a tray of cool drinks. Shin took two glasses and handed one to Lena. The contents of the fluted glass fizzed gently and gave the faint alcoholic scent of apple cider and the refreshing aroma of mint.

After taking a few sips, Lena heaved a deep sigh.

“...I’m sorry. I think I’m okay now.”

It occurred to Lena that this was the first time she made this kind of blunder. She didn’t like parties, but she was used to them. Or at least, she thought she was. But of all people, to do this in front of Shin...

“You must have been exhausted. We’re on leave, but having fun can be tiring in its own way.”

“That might be part of it, but...”

More than that, having you next to me...makes me want to strive for perfection. It makes me nervous. Yes... That must be it.

“I’m sorry.”

“What are you sorry about this time?”

“Um... You must have wanted to talk to people more, but instead, you’re here, taking care of me.”

“Oh.”

After that apathetic utterance, Shin gulped down the contents of his glass.

“I don’t mind. It’s a party, but it’s all people we know. I can talk to them whenever I want. And...”

He trailed off, but Lena didn’t immediately notice the momentary pause, the

way his tone became a bit more pitched. But the aged waiter, who had served for many years in this hotel and knew how to read the guests' moods, did pick up on it. He approached the two like a shadow and took their glasses from them, then left with the same silent speed, leaving the two of them alone on the terrace.

"...I wouldn't want to spend today with anyone but you," Shin eventually said.

"Huh...?" Lena looked up in surprise.

At that very moment, something lit up beyond the terrace, at the shadow of the serene surface of the rippling lake. It wasn't a shadow, but boats. The silhouettes of several small boats. Something shot up from those boats, leaving a trail of light in its wake as it soared up to the heavens. It produced a whistling sound as it cut through the air and then bloomed into a flower of flames in the dark night sky with a thundering blast.

Still looking up, Lena rose to her feet, as if drawn to it. What they had witnessed was...

"Fireworks."

At that moment, the glass ceiling was dyed in a shower of color. The flames blooming in the heavens formed a ring of light. And with that flash of light, the dancing stopped, and they heard the small rumbling of an explosion. But it was lighter than the roar of cannon fire the Eighty-Six were used to hearing. The sound of black gunpowder bursting.

Sparkling embers rained from the sky like stardust. The flaming reaction dyed the empty sky of the new moon with seven vibrant colors. The sound of the music echoed lightly in the silent ballroom. Everyone looked up at once as a second, then a third flaming flower bloomed in the sky.

"Fireworks...?" Someone's whisper echoed loudly through the room.

And with that as a signal, everyone started cheering.

"Fireworks!"

"I haven't seen fireworks in so long..."

"It's been, like, ten years, right...? Wow...!"

A figure stood in the back, where two staircases combined to form a small stage. He had the robust, shapely build typical of the Alliance's people and was dressed in a native red tunic. This was the hotel's manager.

After confirming all eyes were on him, he made an exaggerated bow, then rose to speak to them with a clear voice.

"Eighty-Six of the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package, soldiers of the Federacy!"

The ballroom could house far more than the one hundred or so it currently contained, so his voice reached everyone without needing a microphone. This mountainous land, with its scarce grasslands, mostly raised mountain goats. And so the shepherds who made their homes on this land were trained to speak loudly to converse with other shepherds on neighboring mountains.

"You, who have survived the Eighty-Sixth Sector, have done well to visit our country and stand at the foot of the holy mountain where the dragon king slumbers. To end this pleasant celebration on a positive note, our hotel offers you this display. We hope you enjoy it!"

Beneath the fireworks that shot up into the air and painted the sky in every hue, the orchestra once again began a cheerful marching tune.

As all their friends cheered around them, Raiden, Theo, and Kurena viewed the fireworks in silent appreciation.

"I think my last fireworks display was around this time of year... It's been two years already, huh? It feels like it's been so much longer."

"More of us were still alive back then. It wasn't just us five."

Two years ago, they were still part of the Eighty-Sixth Sector's first defensive squadron. The Republic assembled the Spearhead squadron with the intention of having them wiped out, and by then, over half had already met their end in the line of duty.

It was at the end of summer, and they had less than a month remaining before the rest of their comrades would die. But they hadn't told Lena anything yet at the time, and they were all preparing themselves for what was to come.

But on that one night, they could forget everything. That resolve, the fatigue

they couldn't shake off any longer, the indignant anger they felt, and the horror they kept bottled up since they knew it would be meaningless. On that night alone, they didn't have to think about it.

They recalled the abandoned, ruined soccer stadium, its dark sky awash with color. The sky of the battlefield that hadn't known fireworks in countless years, alight with dazzling flames.

Thinking back on it now, it was a humble display. But it still felt extravagant. Nothing could compare to how precious the sight of that sky lit up by fireworks was.

All the Processors and maintenance-crew members who witnessed that moment had already died, with the exception of the five of them. Though, perhaps there were a few survivors from the first defensive front's second, third, and fourth defensive units present in this room. And they might have happened to be in the area and seen the display. Or perhaps there weren't, and they'd all died.

At the time, that reality didn't strike any of them as odd. Because back then, they still...

"We all thought...that was the last thing we'd ever see," Kurena said solemnly.

Anju stood stock-still, looking up at the dazzling shower of colors produced by the fireworks, their shades slightly distorted by the old glass canopy.

"...Last time..."

As Dustin approached her, he waited for her to continue. He couldn't tell if she was talking to him or to herself, but her voice was heavy with grief.

"The last time I saw fireworks... Daiya was already gone."

"..."

"Dustin... I'm sorry. I still can't look at you the way I did Daiya. And I don't know if I'll ever be able to. But please..."

The flaming flowers bloomed, their burning petals vanishing as quickly as they appeared. Their light wasn't as bright as the light of day, but they had quite the impact. Taking it all in, Anju spoke. Like a transient prayer, too feeble to shine

against the darkness of reality.

“...don’t leave me. Don’t die and leave me alone.”

“...I won’t.”

He thought the Eighty-Six were numb to death. When he saw Shin’s face, looking down at the specimens of dissected brains in the Charité Underground Labyrinth. When he saw how he didn’t even flinch at the sight of tens of thousands of rotting corpses piled up.

In the two months that he’d fought alongside them since the large-scale offensive, they’d acted like weapons in human form who didn’t react to seeing their comrades get blown away by enemy fire.

He thought they were used to it. He thought the deaths of others meant little to them.

But that wasn’t true. It was the furthest thing from the truth. And despite them being pained by it time after time, their friends died one after another, until they couldn’t take it anymore. Until they froze their hearts so that they would no longer have to endure the pain.

But now he felt they could thaw their frozen hearts. And that was why he spoke the words... So he would never have to force her heart to freeze again...

“I promise. I’ll never die and leave you alone. No matter what.”



Báleygr—no, the Eighty-Six soldier known as Shin—didn’t come to question her that day. Apparently, he had other business. And as he and his squadron eventually returned to the Federacy, she, too, would be transferred to a Federacy facility, and so Zelene was currently once again in a transport container. She was sitting in dark silence. The container was covered in metallic walls, meant to prevent any possible transmissions from reaching or leaving her.

Delivering that message to humanity in the High Mobility type was a gamble. A gamble with poor odds of paying off, at that. There shouldn’t have been any living human capable of defeating it. Even if there was, the odds of them tracing it back to her, deep in the Legion’s territories in the United Kingdom, were even

bleaker.

Anyone who could defeat the High Mobility type would have to be a soldier, and soldiers were those who would act as a nation's blade. Their sworn duty was to make sacrifices for their homeland, for those they hold dear. Most anyone who would gain the authority to command the Legion would not use it to stop the mechanical army. They would simply turn the Legion's blades on the other countries.

Her initial exchanges with Shin convinced her that her gamble did indeed fail. A Federacy soldier and a descendant of the Nouzens—a line of savage warriors who reigned supreme in the Empire. One of the bloodlines who saw murder as its glory and its legacy.

But worst of all was the fact that when he faced her, he showed no hatred nor enmity for the Legion. He was so composed and taciturn that she had to question his sanity. A man who feels no grief nor anger for the death of his own family and comrades is a man who holds no love for them to begin with. A man who does not feel indignation toward injustice is a man who tacitly accepts it.

And she could not entrust her wish to such a person.

But that wasn't true. Her initial appraisal of him had been a mistake, and as she sat within that dark container, Zelene could not have been happier to be wrong.

<<Can you see this, No Face...? No... You likely can't. You will no longer act for my sake. Because you no longer need me.>>

I Am Legion, for We Are Many. The very nature of the Legion made them all expendable. The Weisel nestled deep within the territories could churn out countless numbers of the Legion at all times. And that applied even to Zelene. Commander units were just as expendable.

It likely wouldn't be long before another Shepherd took her place as the commander unit in charge of the United Kingdom's front. Nothing would change. It was the Legion's *modus operandi* to trample over any clumsy attempts at strategy with sheer, overwhelming numbers. Zelene's absence would do little to influence the collective.

And that was why No Face, as well as the other Legion commander units that formed the Legion's integrated network, weren't looking for her. They weren't looking at her. All they would do was delete her record, same as they did when a soldier was destroyed.

And by turning a blind eye to her, they turned a blind eye to her scheme.

<<No Face... No—>>

Without producing sound or uttering words, she whispered the name he had in life. Back then, the majority of Legion still had plenty of time remaining in their central processors' initial life span. But knowing that timer would one day tick down to zero, they had already started seeking a solution—a substitute.

And one of the neural networks assimilated from a dead body and used as a substitute back then was No Face.

At the time, Zelene arrived at the anti-United-Kingdom front. And despite not seeing his body directly nor being involved in its dissection, she was a commander unit and, as such, had received a report on it from the United Kingdom's integrated network.

And that was why she knew his name. He himself seemed to have forgotten it, along with the memory of what his face once looked like. No Face was but a prototype, but now he was chosen as one of the commander units for the integrated network. And the reason for that was...

<<I will stop you... As things currently stand, you're not even Legion anymore.>>

Lena's silver eyes looked at the sky as the last bit of stardust left its final trail. The fireworks came to an end, leaving a waterfall of light. The echoes disappeared into the night. Multicolored sparks glittered as they burned away and fluttered down.

Looking up at this sight left Lena feeling oddly forlorn. It was the strange sense of feeling the seasons pass you by, the emptiness one often felt at the end of a celebration. The heartrending loneliness of thinking back on something one had lost. The transient sorrow of crossing paths with a moment you would never again experience.

"It looks like we won't get to see the Revolution Festival's fireworks again."

She could feel the eyes of the one standing next to her turn to look at her. Without meeting his gaze, Lena sank into her reveries. The Revolution Festival. A Republic festival celebrated at the height of summer, in August. Fireworks would shoot up in the city's polluted, filthy skies—fireworks no one paid any attention to.

But even still, she had promised to see those fireworks together with him. Two years ago, on the night of the Revolution Festival. Without knowing that, the month after that, Shin's unit would be sent on its death march.

Beneath the same sky, before they knew each other's faces.

"The Revolution Festival is actually due to begin soon. But we'd be too busy with training and mastering the Armée Furieuse... You've heard about the next dispatch, right?"

"Yes. The northern basin countries, if I'm not mistaken. There's a Legion base in a problematic spot. The 2nd and 3rd Armored Divisions have been having trouble with it and decided to fall back."

The northern basin countries were a collection of small nations located to the north of the Federacy and to the east of the United Kingdom. These countries united as one to oppose the threat of the Legion. Over the last month and even now, the Strike Package's operational unit had been stationed there to assist them.

They were entrusted with tearing a hole in the Legion's encirclement around the country, but the fighting exposed the existence of an enemy base. The Strike Package was forced into a more difficult battle than anticipated, and it had been decided they would need to pull back and reassess the situation.

"The Republic...sees the Revolution Festival as a matter of pride and still intends to hold it, but it's doubtful they'll go as far as preparing fireworks. The reconstruction of the power and production plants is still underway, and the Sheepdogs' resistance is making it difficult to retake the northern regions."

This wasn't true for just the Republic. It was the same everywhere. This was why the Strike Package was going from one area to another on reckless operations. Why they were sent to break through enemy territory in snowy terrain, to topple an enemy base without so much as a map on hand.

Currently, the 2nd and 3rd Armored Divisions were in charge of operations, and while they were successful in the northern basin countries, one wrong move would have forced them to go on a rush through enemy forces that could have very well ended with them being wiped out.

Lena and Shin couldn't go to the Revolution Festival with the war raging around them.

And even if they did, there would be no fireworks to watch. And would they even be there next year? The fireworks? The Revolution Festival?

The Republic?

Will Shin and I...? Will humankind live to see next year?

Once these pessimistic thoughts reared their ugly heads, they rolled around in Lena's mind one after another. Lena shook her head in denial, biting her lips while telling herself she couldn't allow these intrusions.

They would live. Because they'd made a promise. They would see the fireworks of the Revolution Festival together. Once the war ended, they would go and see the sea. Together.

So until then, neither of us can die.

And the moment that desperate thought crossed her mind, Shin spoke as he looked up at the falling embers.

"In that case..."

Having finished the march, the orchestra began playing a waltz again. A slow waltz, its tempo intimate and mellow, befitting the end of the celebrations. As if to lull all who heard it into a gentle slumber, clinging to the vestiges of the party's tumult. An ever so slightly forlorn melody. Judging by the timing, this would be the last song of the night.

Feeling that song drive him forward, Shin parted his lips. The thought that he had to say it now didn't even cross his conscious mind; the words just spilled forth on their own. All too naturally, like the melted snow forming rivers that fed into the fields.

"Then let's go to the Revolution Festival whenever we can. If we can't make it

next year, we'll go the year after. And whenever we do, we'll celebrate."

Two years ago, on the night of the fireworks display, Shin responded to Lena's words, knowing full well that promise could never be granted. It was because it was impossible that he could respond to Lena's wish to see the fireworks together with a vague answer.

He didn't truly want to see the fireworks. He couldn't even wish for it at the time. But now things were different.

"Because it's not an impossible wish anymore."

They'd overcome that fate of certain death and survived. They learned they were allowed to hope. To look forward. To wish for something—for the future. And the girl before him had saved him so many times. She had pulled him back from the brink repeatedly. And so before he even knew it...

He looked down at Lena again. He hadn't said anything, but her silver eyes met his, as if drawn to him. And so he called out to her yearningly.

"Lena..."

"...one day, when we can manage it, let's celebrate. Because it's not an impossible wish anymore."

His crimson gaze bore an earnestness Lena had never seen from Shin before. She was enraptured. The anxiety and fear swirling in her mind had all faded away like a bad dream.

If you say so, I'm sure it'll happen. No matter how impossible it is, I'm sure we'll create that miracle.

That feeling sprang forth from the bottom of her heart. Same as how the stars twinkled at night and how the flowers blossomed at springtime. Like nature. She could believe in him without a trace of a doubt.

And she naturally took a deep breath. She raised both hands without realizing it, clasping them before her chest. If she was going to say the words, it would have to be now. If she was ever going to say it, she wanted it to be right here, right now.

I love you.

When the war ends. When we can watch the fireworks of the Revolution Festival together. I want it to be with you. I want us to see them together. I don't know when it'll happen, but I want us to do it together. As many times as we can, if possible.

But just as she was about to say those words...

“—Lena.”

The sound of his call, the tone of his voice, made her hold her tongue. She swallowed nervously, holding her breath in anticipation. Whatever he was about to say now was going to be special. She could tell. And suddenly, she was terrified. She was afraid to hear them. The decisive words that were about to fill the air.

Their relationship so far was awkward, in a way, as if they were ships constantly passing in the night. But it was pleasant in its vagueness. And those words would shatter that. They would shatter their current relationship, rearranging it into something else.

That might result in something new. But change, and the destruction that inevitably comes with it, is irreversible. Once she heard him out, there would be no going back. And so the thought of hearing the words scared her. The terror gripped her, freezing her body. But...

I have to hear him out.

I have to.

Because Shin must be terrified, too. He's trying so hard to change, and he took that step forward, even though it might destroy all that he is. He must be so much more terrified than I am. All I have to do is wait.

But if she didn't hear him out, she would certainly regret it. And so she clenched her hands. She took a breath, forgetting to exhale, and waited with her lips pursed.

And then Shin spoke.

“I...I'm glad I met you.”

His voice was full of emotion. He didn't know the name for these feelings, so

he simply tried to put it into words. But it didn't feel like it was enough, and all the terms in existence probably couldn't describe the way he felt. The only way he could express himself was through words, and the options felt vexingly insignificant.

"If you weren't there, I would have died while fighting my brother back in the First Sector. I would have fought, fully ready to die. I would have lost my reason to live after I destroyed the Morpho. I wouldn't have fought to return home when I was trapped in the magma lake at the Dragon Fang Mountain. Every step of the way, you saved me again and again."

Shin was the one who collected those who'd fought alongside him and took them to their final destination. And that made Shin someone who would always be left behind. No one would carry on his memory, and he would simply pass on, with no one to hold on to but himself.

But the moment he began believing he could entrust his memory to her...that was a salvation that could not be matched by anything else. She had supported him for two years, ever since the Eighty-Sixth Sector, when he didn't even know what she looked like.

When she caught up to him one year ago, in that field of lycoris flowers, she gave him a reason to fight on.

And one month ago, on that snowy battlefield, she helped him accept the first and only future he had ever wished for.

"Your being there made me believe...that I should live on."

Lena felt tears building up in her eyes.

Yes. Yes, Shin. I feel the same way. I'm only here because I met you. It's because I learned the secret of the Shepherds and the Black Sheep that I could prepare for the large-scale offensive. By holding on to you all, I learned just how cold and malicious this world really is. I realized just how much of an ugly person I really am. And it was because I could chase after your shadow that I realized who I want to be with.

"It's because you were there that I escaped the Eighty-Sixth Sector."

It's because you were there that I could stop being a white pig.

You made me into who I am today. It was your words that breathed life into the part of me that I cherish to this day. And so, you... The one who changed me. The one who gave me life. I...

"I love you."

The fact that he could finally say those words clearly filled Shin with relief. The words that consumed his every waking thought. If he hadn't mustered the courage to say them after all this time, then words would lose all meaning.

She had saved him so many times...and he didn't know if his feelings would be enough to repay her. He didn't know how she would respond. The thought made his mind go dark...but he poured his heart out anyway.

"I want to show you the sea... I want to see things we've never seen before, things yet obscured by the fires of war. I want to enjoy the same sights as you."

In other words...

"I want to remain by your side. I want to be with you. Forever...if possible."

Lena simply stood there, her silver eyes open wide, unable to utter a single word. Her mind was blank.

I feel that way, too. I always want to be with you. Until your final destination. No matter where you end up, that will be my final destination, too. And I don't mean I'll carry your name and memories. I don't mean taking your heart and memories with me.

I want us to be together. To live on together.

His words made her happy. But it wasn't just because she felt loved. No. It wasn't because he had finally told her how he felt.

She was happy because she felt the same way.

I have to answer him. I have to answer him. I have to answer him.

That singular emotion spurred her forward, faster than the speed of light, sooner than she could gather her thoughts. Her body moved forward. Because words would be all too slow. Words wouldn't be enough. Words wouldn't even convey a tenth of her emotions.

The distance between them was less than a single step, and the gap closed in an instant.

Shin's eyes widened in surprise. Lena snaked her arms around his shoulders—not daring to let him escape—and stretched upward. The height difference between them was normally half a head, but Lena's high heels that day covered most of it. His lips were slightly closer than before. And so she drew closer to him, and...

...they shared their first kiss.



AFTERWORD

Men's uniforms are righteous! Hello everyone, this is Asato Asato.

If girls in pilot suits are righteous, I think boys in uniform are equally righteous. If you were to ask me what's so great about them, I'd be inclined to say it's because they're cool. And sexy. Stiff muscles in a work uniform's blazer... And tan marks. Those are so hot—and so cool! So with this in mind, this volume was a uniform fiesta. I don't think any of that made it to the insert art, though. That's life, I guess...

Now, then.

Thank you, as always! I'm proud to deliver Volume 7 of *86—Eighty-Six: Mist*! I suppose this should count as the Alliance arc... Except the Alliance didn't really do all that much. In terms of the in-story timeline, this takes place a month after the United Kingdom arc, while Shin and his group are on leave as well as on vacation from their school.

...What about their time at school, you ask? I'd love to read (write) that, too.

Oh, the afterword's gonna be full of spoilers from this point on, so if you were thinking of reading this before you read the story...you probably shouldn't.

Let's begin with our usual notes.

- That part in chapter 1:
- That whole scene after the "I can fly" line feels pretty lengthy, but it only took about forty pages in the original draft. Everyone was so busy fooling around that it ended up getting very long...
- Actually, my editors told me that since Volumes 4 and 5 lay it on pretty thick, I should try to aim for the same page count as Volume 2. But despite

that, it ended up being longer...

- The new character:

- I was going back forth with his name. I'd go with Olivier at one point, then Olivia in another, or end up messing up his last name... By the way, he's the grandchild of Bel Aegis, who appeared way back in Volume 3 for a bit. She's like a domineering grandmother who's gotten to that really scary age.

And now for spoiler territory.

DON'T CALL THE TITLE MISLEADING!

I mean, what else was I supposed to call it? *86—Eighty-Six: The Steamy Vacation Arc*? What is this, a high school AU? Though, given how this volume features hot springs, dates in town, the boys having a group pillow fight, fireworks, and a test of courage, I pretty much went through all the clichés.

A pillow fight between the girls? They probably did that later. Oh, and by the way.

Mist = steam.

It's a stretch, I know, but use your imagination.

So yeah, I wrote a whole volume with barely any combat. Was that okay to do...? I'm a bit worried, actually.

Also, starting with Volume 4, I began getting comments like "Your writing style kind of changed. Did you finally get used to writing and come into your own?" But really, things like Volume 4's opening scenes and this volume are actually my original, natural writing style. I'm not saying the style in Volumes 1–3, 5, and 6 aren't, but with the series going up to Volume 7, I just kind of... couldn't keep up my super-serious mode for that long, I guess.

Lastly, some thanks.

To my editors, Kiyose and Tsuchiya. Thank you for helping me in this trek through hell. Also, make sure to put girls in swimsuits on the front illustrations! Girls! In! Swimsuits!

To Shirabii. Swimsuits, casual clothes, evening clothes... This was probably the hardest volume to draw in the series, but I really enjoyed writing it! Thank you

very much.

To I-IV. I feel like I really worked you hard this time. It seems like this series is becoming like a weapons exhibition as it goes on, and it's probably not going to stop anytime soon...

To Yoshihara. Volume 2 of the manga is on sale! Rei's finally in the manga... Shin's smile as he spoke of his mixed feelings about his brother gave me chills.

And to all of you who picked up this volume! Thank you so much. Shin and Lena always seem to take one step forward before taking a million steps back, but they made some progress this time... I think? How did you like it?

86—*Eighty-Six* will be going back to its regularly scheduled programming with the next volume, so if you're a bit unsatisfied at the relative lack of combat, look forward to that!

In any case, I hope that, for even a short moment, I could let you play the fly on the wall as our favorite couple flirted their brains out. Geez, get a room, you two!

Music playing while writing this afterword: "Eyes on Me," featured in *Final Fantasy VIII* by Faye Wong.

Oh, and there's a bonus after this. Keep reading if you'd like.

The time they spent with their lips locked felt like an eternity, even if it was only a few seconds. The sweet sensation threatened to rob them both of their senses.

As their lips parted, they exhaled, warm breath brushing past their lips. Their heartbeats separated, ticking at different intervals once again, leaving them with a wistful sense of loneliness.

It was said that the human was once one being comprised of two. But the gods grew enraged, punishing humanity and literally tearing people apart. And ever since then, all people have lived in search of their lost halves. Maybe this was why a kiss felt so sweet and why parting was so terribly painful, even if it was only for a moment...

Shin's eyes were still wide with shock. And looking up at him, Lena could only

marvel. She couldn't believe the way he reacted. His bloodred eyes remained open, and he stood there, blushing and stunned and silent.

It didn't make her laugh, though. She found it precious.

He had made it his pride to fight until the bitter end, shielding himself behind armor to endure the deaths of those who passed on before him. And he always acted as if that armor was his true self.

But in truth, he was just a young man, not yet an adult. What she saw now was his true self, which he'd only given rare glimpses of. And that was why it felt so precious to her. Spurred by that affection, she moved her hands from his shoulders to his cheeks and leaned in for another kiss.

But then she came to her senses.

What...? What am I...? What am I doing...?

Her heartbeat thundered in her ears, and she felt her cheeks burning. She could still feel his lips on hers.

"...?!"

She hurriedly let go of him, recoiling as if she'd just touched something hot. Shin's body heat, which Lena knew was higher than her own, was still warm on her palms. Her hands jumped to her mouth, which had, not a minute ago, been pressed against Shin's.

But... I hadn't yet... I was going to tell him I love him. But he said he loved me before I could say it, and I still haven't... I haven't told him how I feel...!

The moment she realized what she had done, Lena was overcome with more panic than she'd ever felt before.

She had screwed up.

She had intended to tell him she loved him sooner. But he was the first to confess, and it made her so happy that she was overcome with emotion. The impulse that surged within her—a lust of sorts—drove her to kiss him before she could respond.

But I haven't told him anything yet. We're not in a relationship... We're not... lovers, so... This...this is...improper...! Promiscuous...!

Shin blinked his red eyes, finally snapping out of his stupor, and looked at Lena. His lips moved. And she thought she knew what he was going to say, and it made Lena panic all the more. And so with her mind still blank, she spoke quickly.

“Ah, ah, n-no, this is wrong, er...”

Lena herself didn’t know what was wrong.

“Um...”

She’d nearly said *I’m sorry* on reflex. But she knew that would only create another misunderstanding, so she swallowed her words at the last minute. She had nothing better to say, though. And she was too panicked to understand that all she needed to do was say the words back. It wasn’t too late. Even now.

“G-g-goodnightsweetdreamsgoodbye!”

With this nonsensical scream, she bolted away like a frightened rabbit. And like Cinderella, who ran away just as the magic had begun to wear off, one of her silver high heels slipped from her foot, remaining behind on the flagstones and glittering in the starlight.

“.....Um. What does this mean...?”

Shin was left behind all alone, baffled by the discrepancy between Lena’s words and her actions.

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